The New Criterion

October 1996

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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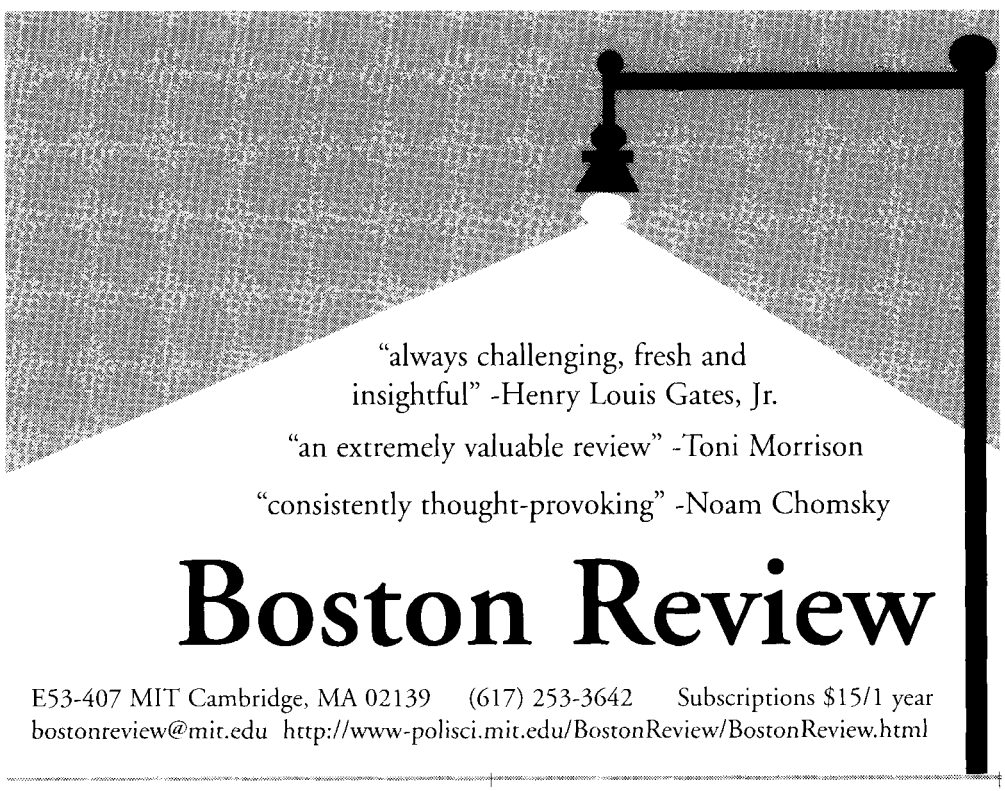

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The New Criterion *October 1996*

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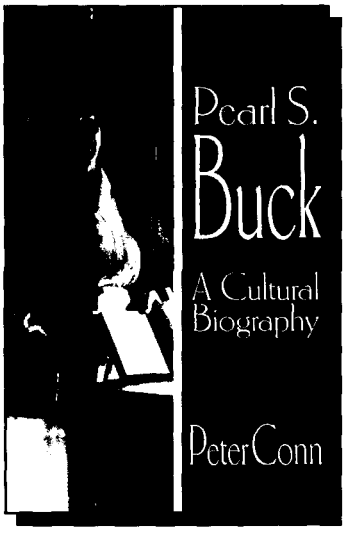

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Notes & Comments: October 1996

Memo to our critics on the Left: a little more candor, please & a little less paranoia

"It is one of the curiosities of neoconservatism that it has continued to see itself as representing an embattled minority even in its hours of triumph." So writes Peter Brooks, a professor of French and comparative literature at Yale, in a recent issue of the London *Times Literary Supplement* (August 30, 1996). Needless to say, this tenured member of the Yale faculty wasn't speaking of any recent neoconservative "hours of triumph" in the lecture halls and classrooms of his own campus, where, to the extent that a neoconservative influence may be discernible at all, it does indeed survive as "an embattled minority" position.

No, what seemed to be roiling this academic eminence, himself a champion of all the radical ideologies that have lately come to corrupt the study of the humanities at Yale, was something he wished to avoid being explicit about, lest he be seen to allude to the role that he and his colleagues in comparative literature may have played in a recent Yale scandal. This was the uproar caused by the withdrawal of a gift of twenty million dollars by a Yale alumnus—Lee M. Bass of Fort Worth, Texas—that was intended to support a new program for Yale undergraduates in the history and achievements of Western civilization.

It will be recalled that Mr. Bass made that gift to Yale in 1991, and was moved to withdraw it some four years later when it became unmistakably apparent that the Yale faculty had conspired with the university administration to thwart the educational purposes which the gift was designed to serve. The terms of the gift called for the creation of seven senior and four junior professorships for the new double-credit survey course in Western civilization, yet in clear violation of the terms of the gift Yale refused to act on those appointments, hoping instead to channel funds from the gift into the kind of politically correct, multicultural courses—"gender studies," et al.—that were already disfiguring the study of the humanities at Yale.

As we noted in this space in our issue of April 1995, in the immediate aftermath of the Bass affair, Professor Brooks's colleague in Yale's comparative literature department, Michael Holquist, was nothing if not explicit about the kind of "fusion" courses the Bass funds would be used for when he declared that literature and history could no longer be taught "without reference to O. J. Simpson." It was to prevent such a use of his gift that Mr. Bass withdrew it.

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And how does Professor Brooks deal with this unlovely attempt to derail the purposes of the Bass gift? Without ever once mentioning the uproar in which his own department was a driving force, Professor Brooks denounces what he characterizes as "the neoconservative onslaught [that] has created a pervasive suspicion between the educational establishment and the society from which it must draw support," and laments that "private donors to universities have gained greater power over the use of their monies."

We frankly have no idea of whether Mr. Bass's views on this or any other subject may accurately be described as neoconservative. And if the criticisms that we and others have lavished upon the way the humanities are taught in the universities today have indeed caused the public to take a closer look at what is actually occurring in the classrooms of the academy, we welcome that development without entertaining any illusions about imminent reversal of policy in that quarter.

As for private donors to universities acquiring more of a voice in the way their monies are used, we say "Amen! and high time, too." But we are not overly optimistic about the outcome. After all, the successful actions taken by Professor Brooks and his colleagues at Yale have provided us with a vivid demonstration of the way even a very generous private donor can be defeated by the tenured radicals who continue to dominate the universities. Let's not forget that the real losers in the Yale uproar are the school's undergraduates.

It is also nonsense—and dishonest nonsense, too—for Professor Brooks to speak, as he does in *The Times Literary Supplement*, of some mysterious "access to the mass media" which neoconservative critics are alleged to have enjoyed in this controversy. All he can possibly mean by "mass media" in this connection is *The Wall Street Journal*, for everywhere else in the mass media—as Professor Brooks has every reason to know—the politically correct views of the Left-liberal establishment are fully in control.

Isn't it time for stalwarts of the academic Left like Peter Brooks to be more candid in arguing their case—explaining to the public why they prefer "gender studies" programs in Western civilization, for example—and a little less paranoid about their critics? Or are they so hopelessly entrenched in their own deconstructionist mystique that they are no longer capable of making distinctions between truth and falsehood?

Protecting a legacy

One of the most debilitating side effects of liberal intellectual fashion in modern times is a peculiar species of political colorblindness: nothing pink or red registers accurately. No matter how tyrannous a regime or doctrine may be, as long as its left-wing credentials are in good order it enjoys a powerful rhetorical dispensation, a sort of metaphysical *nihil obstat*. The generic name of this dispensation is "idealism": in theory a patent of noble intentions, but in practice a seductive moral narcotic that coats everything it touches with a glaze of mendacious sentiment. Even the most barbarous left-wing despotism can be camouflaged by repeated doses of this specific.

Not that despotism itself always goes unrecognized: indeed, part of the romance is to acknowledge and even deplore the "excesses" and cruelties of particular actors while praising the underlying "ideals" that supposedly inform the "movement." The early-modern master of this spiritual legerdemain was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who prattled on about establishing the "reign of

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virtue" while laying the groundwork for extraordinary tyranny. "Those who dare to undertake the institution of a people," Rousseau wrote in a chilling passage of *The Social Contract*, "must feel themselves capable, as it were, of changing human nature, of transforming each individual . . . into a part of a much greater whole, . . . of altering the constitution of man for the purpose of strengthening it." Not for nothing did Rousseau's disciple Robespierre speak of "virtue and its emanation, terror."

In our own day, such Rousseavian subterfuge has cropped up as regularly as weeds wherever Marxism and its offshoots (Communism, socialism in all its varieties) have flourished. In "A Dearth of Feeling," her contribution to our series on the Future of the European Past that appears in this issue, the political correspondent Anne Applebaum provides an insightful analysis of this phenomenon. In the course of her essay, she has occasion to quote Tina Rosenberg—the latest addition to *The New York Times*'s stable of editorial writers and author of the Pultizer Prize-winning book about Eastern Europe, *The Haunted Land*. Quoth Ms. Rosenberg: "Communism's ideals of equality, solidarity, social justice, an end to misery, and power to the oppressed are indeed beautiful." Anne Applebaum comments: "Here it is again: the ideas were fine, it is the people who failed. That the ideas were wrong, still escapes her; that Hitler had ideals, too, is also not mentioned."

How can we account for this political color blindness? Why is it that everything red comes out looking peachy? As Ms. Applebaum points out in her essay, it is well known that Stalin killed at least twice as many people as Hitler. Why then are not Stalin's "ideals"—the "beautiful" ideals of Communism—as thoroughly discredited as the "ideals" of Nazism? Part of the reason, Ms. Applebaum suggests, lies in "a deep desire to protect the legacy of the Western Left," whose intellectual sources and guiding rhetoric are consonant with those of Soviet Communism: "To condemn the Soviet Union too thoroughly would be to condemn a part of what the Western Left held dear."

Among much else, Ms. Applebaum's important essay makes it clear that until we are prepared to strip Communism of its façade of virtue and regard it, along with National Socialism, as one of "the great ills of our century," we will be condemned to misunderstand not only the history of Communist regimes but also our own recent history, especially as regards our role in the Cold War. Coming to terms with the truth means not simply rejecting Stalinism, but understanding that what Tina Rosenberg—like so many other Western intellectuals—regards as the "beautiful" ideals of Communism are themselves irredeemably corrupt. It means understanding that the rhetoric of idealism is often a cloak for tyranny. It means, finally, dispensing with the the rose-colored spectacles that endow every impulse toward socialism with the patina of virtue.

The myths of "The West"

When it comes to endowing the past with a sentimental glaze, few organizations have more expertly dispensed the pink-colored spun sugar than the Public Broadcasting Service. The latest example of politically correct history at the taxpayers' expense is a nine-part, twelve-and-a-half-hour orgy of liberal myth-making called *The West*, which was shown nationwide on PBS in September. Directed and co-produced by Stephen Ives—a protégé of Ken Burns, who made his name bringing PBS's special brand of saccharine to the Civil War a few years ago—this "documentary" about the settling of the American West is reviewed below by James Tuttleton. As Mr. Tuttleton shows, *The West*, though cinematically striking, is a

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congeries of PC clichés starring noble Indians (or "Native Americans") who were at one with the land and themselves versus nasty white frontiersmen whose greed, rapacity, and spiritual shallowness are veritable prodigies of obtuse evil. (Perhaps our favorite moment in the first episode came when one academic expert smugly explained that one tribe of Indians had no words for I, me, or mine, but only "we": the Indians, you see, were Communists *avant la lettre*.)

We think that Mr. Tuttleton says all that needs to be said about this sentimental travesty of American history—even if, with his customary gallantry, he is only too kind in his assessment of the defects of the series. We mention *The West* here only to point out that its early reception by *The New York Times* was the perfect politically correct journalistic correlative to this example of PC melodrama. In neither of the two pieces that the *Times* ran to announce the series—a Saturday television review by Walter Goodman and a Sunday Arts & Leisure feature by Caryn James—is there the shadow of an adumbration of a hint that *The West* is anything other than responsible history ("fiercely and brilliantly rooted in fact," in Ms. James's memorable mischaracterization). In other words, *The New York Times* has once again demonstrated how far it is hostage to the radical multicultural agenda that has done so much to deform the teaching of history. In this, *The New York Times*'s centennial year, perhaps their motto ought to be amended: not "All the News That's Fit to Print," but "All the News That Fits Our Myths."

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The future of the European past: II

A dearth of feeling

by Anne Applebaum

Venice has the Piazza San Marco, Paris has the Eiffel Tower, and now Prague has the Charles Bridge: wide and pedestrianized, blackened with age—and suffused with the spirit of capitalism. There are buskers and hustlers along the bridge, and, every fifteen feet or so, someone is selling very much what one would expect to find for sale in such a postcard-perfect spot. Paintings of appropriately pretty streets are on display, along with bargain jewelry, and "Prague" key chains. Soviet military paraphernalia is for sale, too: caps, badges, belt buckles, and little pins, tin Lenin and Brezhnev images of the sort which Soviet school children and Soviet veterans once wore on their respective uniforms.

It is a familiar sight now, but still an odd one. After all, most of the people buying these things are Americans and West Europeans, people who would be sickened by the thought of wearing a swastika. They see nothing wrong, on the other hand, with sporting the hammer and sickle on a T-shirt or a hat. It is a minor observation—but sometimes it is through just such minor observations that a cultural mood is best observed. Here, the lesson could not be more clear: while the symbol of one mass murder fills us with horror, the symbol of another mass murder makes us laugh.

There are other ways, both minor and less so, in which the same phenomenon can be observed. Look, for example, at the use of the term "collaborator" in English: it is applied broadly and frequently to the leaders of Vichy France and other Nazi parties in Europe—but it is almost never attached to East European Communists like General Jaruzelski or Janos Kadar. Equally odd is the different sense of propriety that applies to Western statesmen visiting foreign graveyards. In 1994, Bill Clinton visited Minsk, and asked to visit the mass graves which lie in the woods of Kuropaty outside the city, the scene of a Stalinist massacre. The Belorussian leadership refused. The president went anyway (on the "unofficial" part of his trip) but where was the outcry? Where were the furious editorials and letters to the editor?

If there is a dearth of feeling among politicians, journalists, and Prague tourists that what happened in Eastern Europe was evil in some fundamental way, that is matched and multiplied in Western popular culture. The Cold War produced James Bond thrillers and cartoon Russians of the sort who appear in Rambo films, but nothing even approaching the attempted quality of *Schindler's List* or *Sophie's Choice*, or the mass popularity of the TV series "Holocaust." Steven Spielberg, probably Hollywood's leading director (like it or not) has chosen to make films about Japanese concentration camps (*Empire of the Sun*) and Nazi concentration camps, but not about Stalinist concentration camps. The latter don't catch the imagination in the same way.

As I say, these are all small things: slips of

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the tongue, lines in an article, the presence or absence of Hollywood films. But put them all together and they make a story. Intellectually, Americans and West Europeans know what happened in the Soviet Union.

Most educated people know that Stalin killed, by means of mass murder and concentration camps, at least twice as many innocent people as Hitler. And yet almost no one in the West feels these crimes to have been evil in the same, visceral way that they feel Hitler's crimes to have been evil.

Solzhenitsyn has been published here; the revelations of the *glasnost* years received due publicity abroad. The information about what happened is widely available: most educated people know that Stalin killed, by means of mass murder and concentration camps, at least twice as many innocent people as Hitler—not because he was a "worse" or "more unique" dictator (that is a pointless debate if there ever was one) but because he was in power much longer. He and his henchmen had time to stage the purges in Russia and the artificial famine in Ukraine, the murder of one in ten Balts and the near-liquidation of the Crimean Tartars, as well as the Katyn massacres, the Vinnitsa massacres, the Kuropaty massacres, among thousands of others. They also had time to plan educational and judicial systems which were designed to alter human nature and to erase historical memory—and in some cases succeeded. They even had time to foment civil wars in Africa, Asia, and Latin America as well. Hitler had time only for one attempted genocide, although he planned others.

And yet—Cold War propaganda notwithstanding—almost no one in the West feels these crimes to have been evil in the same, visceral way that they feel Hitler's crimes to have been evil. No one feels that the system itself was based on inhumane principles, or upon a fundamental misunderstanding of human nature. Ken Livingstone, a British MP who is a leading light of what is now referred to as "Old Labour" (as opposed to New Labour, led by Tony Blair), recently struggled to explain the difference to me. Yes, the Nazis were "evil," he said. But the Soviet Union was "deformed." That view echoes the feeling that many people have, even people who are not Old Labour, even people who think of themselves as "conservative" or "right-wing": the Soviet Union simply went wrong somehow, but it was not fundamentally wrong in the way that Hitler's Germany was wrong. The ideas were good—it was the people who failed.

Until recently, it was possible to explain this lack or absence of popular feeling about the tragedy of European Communism as the logical result of a particular set of circumstances. The passage of time is part of it: Communist regimes did grow less reprehensible as the years went by. Nobody was really frightened of General Jaruzelski, or even Brezhnev. The absence of hard information, backed up by archival research, is clearly part of it too: the paucity of academic work on this subject was long due to a paucity of sources. There were no journalists to record the Siberian camps, as there were journalists in Cambodia during the Pol Pot regime. There were no television cameras to film the victims, as there were in Germany after the Second World War.

But ideology twisted the ways in which we understood Soviet and East European history as well. A small part of the Western Left struggled to explain and sometimes to excuse the purges from the 1930s onwards: even in the 1980s, there were still academics (for some reason, they often tended to be British academics) who went on describing the advantages of East German health care or Polish peace initiatives. The fact of the matter was that the founding philosophers of the Western Left were the same as those

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of the Soviet Union. Some of the language was shared as well: Marx and Engels, the masses, the struggle, the proletariat, the exploiters and exploited, the ownership of the means of production, and more. To condemn the Soviet Union too thoroughly would be to condemn a part of what the Western Left held dear.

The Western Right, on the other hand, did struggle to condemn Soviet crimes, but sometimes in an unhealthy way: surely the man who did the greatest damage to the cause of anti-Communism was Senator McCarthy. Recent documents showing that some of his suspicions were correct don't change the fact that the main effect of his over-zealous pursuit of Communists in the American political establishment was to tarnish the cause of anti-Communism with the brush of chauvinism and intolerance forever. Even what ought to be the most basic, universally accepted assertion—"Communism was evil"—sounds, to the modern ear, "McCarthyite": simplistic and jingoistic and almost ignorant.

Of course, many of our current attitudes are also a fading by-product of the World War II alliance. For if Stalin was even half as bad as Hitler, that reflects rather badly on us: in effect, it is unacceptable to say that we defeated one genocidal criminal with the help of another. To admit that by sending thousands of Russians to their death by forcibly repatriating them after the war—or by consigning millions of people to Soviet rule at Yalta—the Western allies might have participated in war crimes on a vast scale would have undermined the legitimacy of the entire war effort. To admit that Churchill, at least, knew perfectly well what had happened to the Polish officers at Katyn (he denied it at the time) and guessed with some accuracy what was going to happen to East Europeans after the war is to admit that the war was not fought for moral reasons at all. If we admit that Stalin was the moral equivalent of Hitler, that makes some of those old photographs—Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt together—look damaging, almost terrifying now.

All of which is logical, but all of which is now old. In the wake of the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, it seemed to me, as it did to many people, that this form of moral fuzziness, this dismissing of uncomfortable facts, would disappear. I had thought that our old ways of thinking about the Soviet Union would crumble along with the Berlin Wall, that anti-anti-Communism would disappear along with the Warsaw Pact. Freed of ideological constraints, of the legacy of McCarthyism, of memories of a wartime alliance with a country which no longer exists, with new access to archives and survivors' stories, we would at last be able to think and write about what happened in Eastern Europe with some degree of objectivity, some understanding of the depth of the experiment with human nature which was conducted there, and the horrors that it produced. I was wrong: ideology twists our recollections of that past now more than before, not less. And it looks set to go on doing so.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the moral confusion about the past is at its worst, and at its most damaging, in the former territories of the Communist world.

The fact of the matter was that the founding philosophers of the Western Left were the same as those of the Soviet Union. To condemn the Soviet Union too thoroughly would be to condemn a part of what the Western Left held dear.

This was not always the case: during the 1980s, when *glasnost* was just beginning in Russia, gulag survivors' memoirs sold millions of copies, and a new revelation about the past could sell out a newspaper. But more recently, history books containing similar "revelations" are badly reviewed in

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Russia—a new biography of Lenin, based for the first time on archival material, was dismissed by critics as "uninteresting"—or ignored. "People don't want to hear any more about the past," I was told last year by Lev Rozgon, the author of one of the most popular Russian survivors' accounts. "People are tired of the past."

Since then, survivors' accounts have become harder to find, while archives from Vilnius to Vladivostok are closing their doors. Even historians need to eat, and there is more money to be made serving as an interpreter for a Western bank. The survivors themselves are ignored. In Poland, the society of "Siberiaks," the survivors of Siberian concentration camps, is a small and unimportant organization, without much money or national presence. In Russia, Memorial, the group which has dedicated itself to documenting and publishing the history of the gulag, is weak, underfunded and divided, and remains far from the center of public debate.

If there is little attention paid to the written memorials, there are few physical memorials either. In Siberia there are almost none at all. At Vorkuta, where hundreds of thousands died in the mines, the barracks are still inhabited: when the camp was closed, there was nowhere else for ex-guards and ex-prisoners to go. In other parts of Siberia, camp buildings have simply faded back into the forest, unmarked and unremembered. In *Imperium*, his book about Russia, Ryszard Kapuscinski describes his attempt to leave flowers in Vorkuta, in remembrance of the dead:

> [I] wanted to place them somewhere, but I didn't know where. I thought, I'll stick them into some snowdrift, but there were people everywhere, and I felt that doing so would be awkward. I walked farther, but on the next street, the same thing: many people. Meanwhile, the flowers were starting to freeze and stiffen. I wanted to find an empty courtyard, but everywhere children were playing. I worried that they would find the carnations and take them . . . so I went beyond the town limits, and there, calmly, I placed the flowers amid the snowdrifts.

In some East European cities it is possible to find the occasional, usually very modest, memorial. In one Warsaw suburb, a historically minded priest has put up an impressive, and very moving, monument to the victims of Communism, and there are one or two others in the city. In Moscow, there is a small sculpture in front of the Lubyanka, the prison through which thousands of people passed on their way east—but nothing on the scale of the immense monuments to the Great Victory in the Great Patriotic War. In Prague, there is a monument to Jan Palach's self-immolation, where visitors can lay flowers. In Vilnius, people leave flowers beneath a plaque which hangs outside the old KGB headquarters.

But these efforts often seem small and scattered, and they are countered by examples of post-Communist authorities refusing to put up monuments, too. The Belorussian government has refused to devote any resources to building a monument at Kuropaty. The Russian government is also hampering the construction of a full-fledged Polish cemetery in Katyn, on the grounds that it is unnecessary to commemorate the deaths of a few Poles when so many Russians died. Along with this refusal—how quickly things come full circle—the rewriting process has begun. A new book, *The Katyn Detective Story*, has recently been circulating among Russian parliamentarians. It contends that the Katyn murders were committed by the Nazis, not by the Soviet Union, and describes the dead officers as "aggressive idiots," servants of a Polish state which was little more than a "gluttonous European prostitute."

But what really marks the difference between postwar Germany and post-Communist Eastern Europe is not the lack of photographs and the lack of historical memory and the lack of monuments: it is the lack of any public discussion of guilt. A decade has passed since the first glimmer-

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ings of *perestroika* and the first, tentative debate about the more distant past—the 1930s in the old Soviet Union, the 1950s in Eastern Europe. So far, only a handful of people have actually been put on trial—or called to account in any way for the crimes of the past.

Leaving aside the question of ordinary Communists or ordinary informers (of whom there are thousands), there are, at large in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, people who qualify as actual war criminals: men who were directly responsible for organizing mass murders, or for helping to carry them out. Until recently, most of the men who carried out the Katyn massacres were still alive. Before he died, the KGB conducted an interview with one of them, asking him to explain how the murders were carried out, from a technical point of view. Last year, the Russian security services presented it to the cultural attaché of the Polish embassy in Moscow. There was never any suggestion that the man on tape should have been returned to Warsaw for trial.

True, there have been one or two highly publicized trials and arraignments: a few East German border guards, a KGB chief in Latvia, a Czech Stalinist who assisted the Russian invasion of 1968. In Poland, a handful of small trials have been carried out, attracting little attention. The trial of Adam Humer, a man accused of brutal torture during the brief Stalinist era, has received only the briefest notices in the press. Perhaps that was why, when confronted with one of his victims, an elderly woman, he felt perfectly comfortable replying, "shut up, you old bitch." In Russia, where admittedly the problem of the guilty is vast—the Russian republic is still the home of Stalinist prosecutors who sent millions to die—there has not even been a symbolic trial, a mini-Nuremburg, an attempt to point a finger at anyone in particular.

It can be argued that such trials are not a wholly successful way of dealing with the past, nor are they easy to carry out. The Nuremburg trials themselves were fraught with corruptions and contradictions (not the least of which was the presence of Soviet judges who knew perfectly well that their own side was also responsible for mass murder). In the years after the war, West Germany also brought more than eighty-five thousand Nazis to trial, but obtained fewer than seven thousand convictions. The tribunals which examined the cases were notoriously corrupt, and easily swayed by personal jealousies and disputes—although few would argue, in retrospect, that they should not have been carried out at all.

It can also be argued that it is too late for most Stalinist prosecutors to stand trial.

I had thought that our old ways of thinking about the Soviet Union would crumble along with the Berlin Wall, that anti-anti-Communism would disappear along with the Warsaw Pact. I was wrong: ideology twists our recollections of that past now more than before, not less.

Those who committed their crimes before the war are almost certainly all dead, those who were responsible for the deportations of the 1940s are very old. Nuremburg took place directly after the war, when the perpetrators of terrible crimes still, figuratively, had blood on their hands. Of course, this argument would be anathema to Simon Wiesenthal, to the Israelis who put Eichmann on trial in 1961, and even to British prosecutors, who have recently arrested an elderly Belorussian, Szymon Serafimowicz, under the British War Crimes Act, passed in 1991. Even Steven Spielberg, when asked why he made *Schindler's List*, replied, "I was afraid of the world my children were being raised in, that something like the Holocaust could happen to them." It is a sentiment that many, rightly, share.

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Certainly it is also true that—if the comparison is to be made—the Germans themselves were not, during the twenty years after the end of the war, very eager to discuss the Nazi past either. Yet in postwar Germany, Nazi memorabilia was illegal, the Nazi Party was banned—and it has never revived on any large scale. The German state paid enormous reparations to individual Jews (if not always to others) and to the state of Israel. While the Germans may not have talked much about the war in public, official histories of the war were published, monuments were constructed. Everyone knew about Nuremburg; the groundwork was laid for the younger generation to discover the past. By the 1960s—sparked, in fact, by the trial of Auschwitz guards—when the national debate finally began, at least it was possible for the children of Nazis to discover what their parents had done. By the 1980s, the past had almost become a national obsession: hardly an evening passed when there wasn't a documentary or a talk show on German television dealing with the war.

In Eastern Europe, by contrast, Communist symbols and songs are not banned. Communist parties are not banned everywhere either. On the contrary, although the laws vary from country to country, in many places Communist parties have been allowed to retain their (sometimes enormous) assets: buildings, foreign bank accounts, membership lists, cars, and homes. Retired Communist Party members continue to receive outsize pensions. No other political party can match their material wealth: no other political parties existed in Eastern Europe before 1989. Partly as a result, in Poland, in Hungary, in Bulgaria, in Lithuania, and in Russia, well-funded former Communist parties are enjoying a revival; in many countries, they have slowly come to dominate the political scene. Communism has been discussed, but not condemned; Communists have been denounced in the heat of political campaigns, but not put to trial by the judicial system. No groundwork is being laid for the next generation to discover, or to condemn, their oppressive behavior in the past.

Oddly enough, the only systematic attempts to make an official condemnation of the past have occurred in Central Europe, and have involved not Stalinist criminals but petty bureaucrats, and not trials but vetting procedures. At issue was "lustration": the opening of files which contained names of former secret-police informers. Vigorous debates about lustration took place in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany, among others—although in none of those countries were the aims of lustration very broad. Arguments about lustration mainly revolved around the question of whether it was proper for high-ranking officials, particularly elected officials, to go on serving if they had carried out extensive deceptions in the past—and whether the public should have access to the secret files which still contain extensive records of their day-to-day activities. Corruption was also at issue, along with the need for openness: among other things, the interior ministry files in most post-Communist countries contain evidence of which Communist leaders stole what money, and how.

Frequently, debates about lustration degenerated into debates about the past—which was hardly surprising: the past had not been discussed or expiated in any other way. Issues sometimes merged. Without any memorials, without any camp monuments, without any trials, many Central Europeans came to expect too much of lustration; many believed that lustration would help clear the air altogether, that it would provide a solution both to the nagging sense that the more distant, Stalinist crimes had not been punished, and to more recent memories of spying and petty theft. Perhaps as a result of these high expectations—and the depth of the objections—the lustration debate in Poland was so vicious that it brought down the first, fully elected democratic government; in Hungary, it was no less controversial. Curiously, in both coun-

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tries the strongest case against lustration was made not by former Communists, but by former dissidents. Mostly, they seem to have feared what it would reveal about their opposition movements: Adam Michnik, a Polish dissident who was allowed to look at his friends' files soon after the fall of Communism (an anomaly of the sort created by the failure to give equal access to the files: why Michnik? why not others?) emerged shocked at how many of his old colleagues had in fact been informers, as he has since told many people. He later led the fight against lustration.

Elsewhere, of course, files were kept closed for more obvious reasons. Former Communists object to lustration for the same reason that they object to trials of Stalinists and monuments to Stalinist crimes: they object because they do not want to confess to their own guilt, or do not want to be associated with the crimes of others. Boris Yeltsin is only one of hundreds of former Soviet politicians who fall clearly into this category.

In the end, only the Czech and East German governments succeeded in passing such a law: in both countries, it is possible for ordinary citizens to get hold of their own files. In the Czech Republic, it is also the case that people who had previously worked as informers or as high-ranking Communists cannot hold elected office. In Germany, some high-ranking former Communists have also lost their jobs. The results are there to see: although in most of the Eastern block, the political scene is dominated by former Communists, that is not the case in either the Czech Republic or former East Germany.

But if the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 did not bring about a reassessment of the legacy of the Communist past in former Communist parts of Europe, the transformation in the West was no less incomplete. The lack of moral certainty where Soviet crimes are concerned was always academic, as well as popular. For example, until five or ten years ago, Robert Conquest, author of *The Great Terror*, was often considered a paranoid alarmist for claiming that Stalin had murdered millions of people, when most history books spoke of hundreds: certainly I was taught as much when studying Russian history at Yale in the mid-1980s. His views are, of course, now mainstream: they are supported by archival evidence, to the limited extent that such evidence is now available, and by Soviet historians.

And yet—the opposite view persists as well. Legitimate academics, with prestigious jobs at prestigious universities, can write books which amount to "gulag denial," and nobody finds their writing either offensive or objectionable. J. Arch Getty, of the University of California, Riverside—famous for having written that "thousands" died in the gulag—goes on teaching and writing as always, but there are younger ones, too.

Former Communists object to lustration for the same reason that they object to trials of Stalinists and monuments to Stalinist crimes: because they do not want to confess to their own guilt, or do not want to be associated with the crimes of others. Boris Yeltsin is only one of hundreds of former Soviet politicians who fall clearly into this category.

Robert W. Thurston, a tenured professor at Miami University, recently wrote a book called *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934–1941*, published by the equally reputable Yale University Press. In it he suggests, among other things, that the great purge took place without Stalin's knowledge, that it was supported by many people, and that, by promoting upward mobility, it laid the foundations for *perestroika*. Aside

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from getting many of his facts wrong—see Conquest's list of them in his review in the *Times Literary Supplement* ("Small Terror, few dead," May 31, 1996)—Thurston seems unable, throughout the book, to understand the absurdity of what he is saying. After all, the same could be said (once again) of Hitler's Germany: Hitler was voted into power, after all; there is no proof he knew about the Holocaust; and under his regime many young, enthusiastic people came to power much earlier than they would have done otherwise. None of which amounts to a defense of a regime that also murdered millions of people.

Most of the "interest" in the book partly derives, of course, from the fact that it is different, that it purports to offer an opposite idea, a new perspective. This point of view—the idea that there is still "another side to the story," that not to acknowledge it would be "one-sided"—persists in the less genteel world of journalism as well. Not long ago, I was told by the editor of the *London Review of Books* that a review I had written of David Remnick's *Lenin's Tomb* could not be printed because it was too anti-Soviet. When I pointed out that the book itself was not exactly pro-Soviet, she replied that if that were the case, the book would not be reviewed. It wasn't.

In the West, a similar, and closely related, argument has also been mounted against those East Europeans who want to examine—and to condemn—the behavior of Communist regimes. This point was most eloquently put in a book which recently won the National Book Award in the United States as well as a Pulitzer Prize: *The Haunted Land* by Tina Rosenberg, who now writes editorials for *The New York Times*. Rosenberg does a good job at carefully enumerating the many complexities and drawbacks of lustration and war crimes trials. However, she then comes to the conclusion that, while trials are fine for Latin American dictators, they are not acceptable for East Europeans. Her reasoning depends partly upon the distinction, common among Western intellectuals, between the evil aims of most dictatorships, and the good intentions of Communism: "Communism's ideas of equality, solidarity, social justice, an end to misery, and power to the oppressed are indeed beautiful," in her own words. Here it is again: the ideas were fine, it is the people who failed. That the ideas were wrong, still escapes her; that Hitler had ideals, too, is also not mentioned.

But most of Rosenberg's argument—like the arguments of others in the Western and Eastern media who feared an anti-Communist "witch hunt"—emphasizes the fragility of civil society in the newly democratic societies of Central and Eastern Europe. Condemnation of the past, she feared, could degenerate into violations of civil liberties, into persecution of innocent people, into moral self-righteousness and (figurative) burnings at the stake. What she appears to be afraid of is resurgent "nationalism" of a 1930s sort, perhaps in the form of an "anti-Communist right-wing." Even the title of her book, like the title of so many books written about the region recently, gives the idea away: Central Europe is "the haunted land" in her words, dogged by the prewar past, just as the lands of ex-Yugoslavia are filled with Robert Kaplan's "Balkan ghosts."

But the problem with modern Eastern Europe is not the legacy of the 1930s: the problem with Eastern Europe is the legacy of Communism, whether in the form of corruption, poverty, pollution, ill-health, or distorted values. Equally, the real danger to democracy and capitalism in Poland or Russia is not some form of warmed-over fascism, but Communist ideals, the Communist economic legacy, and the corrupt habits of former Communists themselves. Almost every time a regime has gone sour in the former Communist bloc over the past five years—in Serbia most notably, but in Slovakia as well, for example—the root cause is not some group of new nationalists, but former Communists wearing new clothes. As for the region disintegrating into an anti-Communist uproar, precisely the

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opposite has occurred. There have been very few unjust prosecutions of former Communists in the region, because there have been hardly any prosecutions of any kind.

If the Russian leadership really remembered that Stalin deported tens of thousands of Chechens to Siberia, they would be unable blithely to drop bombs on civilians in Chechnya today, murdering forty thousand.

In fact, Rosenberg's argument, like that of Thurston or Getty, appears to be rooted not in actual observation of life in Central Europe, but in a deep desire to protect the legacy of the Western Left, again in her words, "Communism's ideas of equality, solidarity, social justice, an end to misery, and power to the oppressed." Perhaps not coincidentally, she has also defended Thurston in print, in an odd little article in *The New York Times Book Review*. In the course of denouncing David Irving, the Nazi apologist, and arguing that his book should not be published by a reputable publisher, she applauds the decision of the Yale University Press to publish Thurston, the Stalin apologist, on the grounds that challenging and controversial ideas, even if they amount to gulag denial, deserve to see the light of day. Again, her argument only makes sense if we assume that only one version of totalitarianism and mass murder this century deserves a moral condemnation, while others ought to be treated as neutral historical phenomena. It only makes sense if we assume that there was, within Communism, something "good" which can still be rescued and brought to light, whereas there was no such "good" to be found in Hitler's Germany. In other words, it doesn't make sense at all.

But does it matter? Does the existence of popular and highly regarded journalists and academics who play down the terror and distortions of Communism make any difference to us? Does the failure to condemn, or even to think about the past, matter to the Central Europeans either?

Alas, it does. Look first, again, at the former Communist bloc: the most obvious danger to civil society in the region is not that posed by non-existent anti-Communists. The real fear is now what the absence of lustration or the absence of official condemnation of the past might do to civil society, and to popular awareness of concepts like "justice" and "public morality."

Compare, once again, the role of history in the politics of postwar Germany and the politics of post-Soviet Russia. In modern Germany, the awareness of guilt—the memory of the Second World War—continues to matter tremendously to German politicians. Even in the years before the flowering of popular memory, this was the case. Germany's commitments to NATO, and to the European community, both derive from German politicians' fears of repeating the past; Helmut Kohl, the German chancellor, has followed his predecessors and explicitly stated his desire to lock Germany permanently into a European superstate, the better to prevent Germany from misbehaving again. As recently as last year, the German parliament debated for weeks over whether to send peacekeeping troops abroad: the very thought of Germans in uniform outside Germany, for whatever purpose, was too much for many German politicians.

The Russian leadership feels no such qualms. If they really remembered—viscerally, emotionally remembered—that Stalin, in the name of Communism and Great Russian imperialism, deported tens of thousands of Chechens to Siberia, the inhabitants of the Kremlin would be unable blithely to drop bombs on civilians in Chechnya today, murdering forty thousand, or to announce a plan to "eliminate the Chechens like dogs," as Boris Yeltsin promised in the wake of one recent Chechen hostage crisis.

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The effects of the failure to remember the past elsewhere in Eastern Europe are less dramatic, but no less damaging. Take another comparison: Poland and the Czech Republic. While they carried out their lustration program, the Czechs went through a very brief period of national obsession with spies, secret agents, and personal files. Many mistakes were made, as Tina Rosenberg recorded; some people who felt they were innocent were excluded from national politics (although not excluded from anything else). Some unattractive young people, none of whom had ever faced the decisions which their parents had faced, made use of lustration for their own political ends. Now the wave of interest in the subject has virtually disappeared (so much for the disruption of civil society which Rosenberg feared) but the stigma attached to Communism remains. As noted above, the Czech Republic is one of the few in Central Europe which has not elected former Communists back to power.

In Poland, on the other hand, the unopened files remain a hovering presence in political life. In January, the Polish prime minister, Jozef Oleksy, was forced to resign: he had been accused of having been a KGB spy, indeed of remaining a KGB spy after 1989. Originally, this information came from Lech Walesa, who was then the Polish president. Why did Mr. Walesa have privileged access to the files? What is the truth about Mr. Oleksy's position? Why were his Russian contacts not known before he became prime minister? Nobody has answers. And so it will go in the future: the presence of secrets will weigh heavily on politicians, poisoning public life.

The return to dominance of elites who are associated with the totalitarian past will also have a profound impact on the shape of the economies of the Eastern bloc. Of course it might be argued that the former Communists are now merely a nascent bourgeoisie, which is to be applauded; and that is what the best of them indeed are. But it is not quite that simple. The evolution of a bourgeoisie is a healthy phenomenon when it grows and prospers thanks to bourgeois values: hard work, honesty, personal responsibility. What happens when you have a corrupt business class which is intimately entwined with a corrupt political class? You might still have a bourgeoisie, and you might still have capitalism, but they won't necessarily take the form that everyone would applaud.

Tina Rosenberg's reasoning depends partly upon the distinction, common among Western intellectuals, between the evil aims of most dictatorships, and the good intentions of Communism. That the ideas were wrong, still escapes her; that Hitler had ideals, too, is also not mentioned.

For all the talk of liberalism and Thatcherism and free markets that took place in the region in 1989, the model which Central Europe will probably most closely resemble in the coming years is that of pre-Tangentopoli Italy. Whether the model is northern or southern Italy depends upon the country (Poland might be the former, Rumania is perhaps the latter) but the idea is the same: there will be some forms of robust private entrepreneurship; an enormous, untaxed, grey market; and large companies, some state-owned and some private, which enjoy deeply corrupt relationships with powerful politicians. Various forms of criminal Mafia will dominate some parts of the region; politicians will come to "represent" various business interests, as they clearly do already, particularly in Russia. Some post-Soviet republics may, of course, slide further. Yegor Gaidar once said that Russia faced the choice between aspiring to be like America, or being forced to become like Africa. But

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Latin America is an option, too: huge gaps between rich and poor, political violence, massive slums, perennially unstable fiscal and monetary policies.

Worse than the effect on politics and economics, though, is the effect which the denial of all guilt has on ordinary East Europeans themselves. Leaving aside the scandals which will continue to engulf successive regimes, leaving aside the lack of history which allows Mr. Yeltsin to behave as he does in the Caucasus, there is another way in which the resurgence of old elites will have a powerful impact on the politics of Eastern Europe in the future: if scoundrels of the old regime go unpunished, then good will in no way have been seen to triumph over evil. This may sound apocalyptic, but it is not politically irrelevant. The police do not need to catch all the criminals all the time for most people to submit to public order, but they need to catch a significant proportion. Nothing encourages lawlessness more than the sight of villains—even if they are merely people who took money for information, not concentration camp guards—getting away with it, living off their spoils, and laughing in the public's face.

For millions of people, the failure to condemn the past proves that it does not pay to be decent. Tina Rosenberg wrote that "under Communism, the lines of complicity ran like veins and arteries through the human body." But that was patently not the case: there were people who collaborated far more than others. And from the current perspective, it seems to most people that the more you collaborated, the wiser you were. Those who got ahead in the past have been able to keep their apartments, their dachas, and control of the businesses which they bought up on the cheap. Millions of ordinary people, who were never seduced by the ideology, never joined the party for the sake of a career, simply look foolish. Honesty does not pay; corruption does. Those who work hard do not succeed, those who murder and bribe their way to power and prominence do.

Our failure in the West to understand the magnitude of what happened in Central Europe does not, of course, have the same profound implications for our way of life. Our tolerance for "gulag deniers" in our universities or admirers of Communism in our press will not destroy the moral fabric of our society: the Cold War is over, after all, and there is no real intellectual or political force left in the Communist or even the socialist parties of the West.

But there will be consequences. For one, our understanding of what is happening now in the former Soviet Union is distorted by our misunderstanding of history. Again, if we really felt—if we really, deeply felt—that what Stalin did to the Chechens amounted to genocide, it is not only Yeltsin who would be unable to do the same things to them now, but we who would be unable to sit back with any equanimity and watch him. In fact, our response to the shocking invasion of Grozny, to the murder of many thousands of people, has been to turn away and call it an internal Russian matter: there is even some evidence that American intelligence may have been used in the (unsuccessful) attempt to defeat the Chechens.

If we go on accepting the idea that there are "multiple interpretations" of Soviet history, it is our own history which we will go on misunderstanding. Already, our elites are forgetting why the rest of the world still expects us to behave like a "moral" power, not merely a Machiavellian one.

The moral horror which we would have felt following a German invasion of Sudetenland in 1952, or which we do feel when we observe German neo-Nazism today, is simply not there in our attitudes to Russia.

Our approach to European security

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questions is distorted in similar ways. When Nazi Germany finally fell, the rest of the West mobilized in a way it never had done before, and may never do again. Both NATO and the European Community were created in part to cement Germany into the West, to prevent Germany from ever breaking away from civilized "normality" again. No such efforts have been made with either Central Europe or Russia. On the contrary: when the nations of Central Europe first petitioned to join NATO in 1991, the Bush administration treated them like unwanted guests. They were told to be quiet, to go home, to stop disrupting the world of "adult" diplomats and statesmen. There was no sense that they had a right to be afraid—even a right to be paranoid—about their national sovereignty, after the experience of forty years of occupation. Even now, as NATO membership for some Central European states begins to look feasible, it is still possible to meet Western ambassadors in Central European capitals who complain privately that NATO expansion is a "great bother," more trouble than it's worth.

Finally, though, if we go on accepting the idea that there are "multiple interpretations" of Soviet history, it is our own history which we will go on misunderstanding. Why did we fight the Cold War, after all? Was it because crazed right-wing politicians, in cahoots with the military-industrial complex and the CIA, invented the whole thing and forced two generations of Americans to go along with it? Or was there something more important happening? Was there a real ideological enemy, whose ideas and weapons really did threaten some of the most fundamental principles of our civilization, whose political aim was to destroy the West, and whose political achievements included the destruction of the economies and civil societies of half of the European continent—Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Eastern Germany, the nations of Yugoslavia, the Baltic States, Russia, Belorussia, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—not to mention large parts of Africa and Asia as well?

I am afraid that it is only a matter of time before the former proposition begins to seem true: until, more and more, the Cold War seems like a joke got up by a few fanatics and "McCarthyites," the NATO alliance seems like an expensive bother, and the support for dissidents and human rights advocates in the former Soviet Union seems like the whim of a few ancient politicians with bees in their collective bonnets. Already, we are forgetting, very rapidly, what it was that mobilized us, what inspired us, what convinced our politicians to spend the billions which they undoubtedly did spend. Already, our elites are forgetting why the rest of the world still expects us to behave like a "moral" power, not merely a Machiavellian one.

The change is already happening. Not long ago, I was in California, the land of lost history, and listened to an educated acquaintance complain at great length about the amount of money which the Cold War cost: asked whether he would have preferred to see a Western Europe dominated by Communist regimes, he shrugged and said he didn't much mind. Five decades' worth of Western solidarity, carefully forged in the NATO alliance, a myriad of free-trade agreements, a thousand summits and conferences: all had disappeared. His sense that there is something called Western civilization, which needs, periodically, to be defended from challenges like the one once posed by Communism—that had disappeared too.

As long as Communism is not seen, along with National Socialism, as one of the great ills of our century, Californians and others will grow more inclined to see the Cold War as a waste of time and the West as a fiction. In the end, it is we Americans who will not understand our past, we who will not understand why the world perceives us as it does, we who will not understand how our country came to be the way it is. In the end it is we who will wake up and realize that we do not know who we are.

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The Sixties according to Paul Berman

by Roger Kimball

The utopian mentality . . . is withering away. Its intellectual status has sunk to the level of a pathetic adolescent gibberish surviving in leftist sects.
—Leszek Kolakowski

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then . . . I contradict myself;
I am large . . . I contain multitudes.
—Walt Whitman

Tiny flames of pure idealism went up. Everywhere the effect was intoxicating.
—Paul Berman

Anyone fond of the game "What's wrong with this picture?" will have fun with *A Tale of Two Utopias*, Paul Berman's latest exercise in nostalgic socialism and self-congratulation.[1] Well, perhaps "fun" is not quite the *mot juste* for a book as tedious and repetitious as this one. But there is a certain fascination in seeing just how many radical clichés about the 1960s one writer can recycle between two covers and in keeping track of the many, many ways that he finds to convey the conviction of his own superior moral sensitivity. This, indeed, is one area in which Mr. Berman is unquestionably expert. Rarely is he as blunt as he was in a recent *New Yorker* piece celebrating the black Trotskyist C. L. R. James: "we are a noble handful," Mr. Berman explained at the beginning of that essay, pointing out that he belonged to a select group long familiar with James's pamphlets and manifestoes. In *A Tale of Two Utopias*, he generally proceeds by indirection, praising the "idealism" and soulfulness of an entire generation—*his* generation. Not every young person feels "especially tortured by moral self-doubt," Mr. Berman allows. "But there is a certain kind of young person for whom moral tortures are unavoidable, and the natural place for people like that is in a left-wing youth group." Could he possibly have anyone particular in mind?

A Tale of Two Utopias is an exceedingly odd book. Its thesis—but, no, it would be hardly fair to disclose that without first acclimating the reader to the vertiginous sentimentality that forms the atmosphere of Mr. Berman's meditation on the fate of the utopian impulse. If the air is thin in the course of this "journey" it is nonetheless cloying—likewise the arguments, or what pass for arguments.

Mr. Berman is a disappointed radical. But his disappointments have not led him to abandon his radicalism. On the contrary, his disappointments have in a curious way *become* his radicalism. Perhaps it was this skillful feat of political alchemy that led the MacArthur Foundation to confer upon him one of its famous "genius" awards a few years ago. Among other things, that award

1 *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968*, by Paul Berman; Norton, 351 pages, $24.

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ought to have reminded people of what the Austrian novelist Robert Musil had to say about a certain race-horse of genius.

In any event, readers should be forewarned that an air of reproachful woundedness suffuses this book. Mr. Berman knows that things have not worked out as he hoped, that the utopian schemes he once cherished have, all of them, soured and turned rancorous. The adjectives he employs to describe them now range from "kooky," "loony," and "mad" to "criminal"; nevertheless, he comes not to bury leftism but to praise it. If things haven't developed according to plan, well, it is not his fault. Beginning at least in 1965, when (he tells us) he went as a "wide eyed" high-school student to Washington, D.C., to join in an antiwar march, Mr. Berman has been an absolute sucker for what might be called Westchester radicalism. On that occasion in 1965, "Norman Thomas spoke. Joan Baez sang. It was a glorious April afternoon." Obviously, to be young then was very heaven.

In due course, Mr. Berman graduated to Columbia College and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which, despite its "special nuttiness," delivered on its promise "to take young people who felt empty of identity and give them a sense of control over their own destiny." For people who felt "offended by the soft life that was their own," Mr. Berman explains, participation in the SDS and similar organizations filled an existential void. Politics in the ordinary sense was only part of the equation: the deliberately outlandish dress, music, and behavior that radical organizations in the 1960s fostered was also important: it all "generated an atmosphere of confrontation, which turned giddy and hot, which created a festival atmosphere." Which led to the sit-ins, occupation of buildings, and charges of criminal trespassing. Then "off you went to jail, where for once you felt morally at peace." And here we come to the emotional core of *A Tale of Two Utopias*. For out of that same festival atmosphere "came a few tiny indications that a new society, organized on novel principles, might at any moment burst into view."

It was, naturally, "a superior new society." And what made it all so irresistible was the belief, as Mr. Berman recounts, "that we ourselves—the teenage revolutionaries, freaks, hippies, and students, together with our friends and leaders who were five or ten years older and our allies around the world—stood at the heart of a new society." "A society," Mr. Berman expatiates, "of spiritual grandeur."

> Something soulful. A moral advance. And in the glow of the very grand and utopian idea, a thousand disparate events from around the world—the student uprisings, the hippie experiments, the religious transformations, the rise of Communism in some places and the first signs of its fall in other places, the Black Power movement, and onward through feminism and every insurrectionary impulse of the age—seemed to merge into a single tide.

Perhaps this is the place to mention that *A Tale of Two Utopias* does not come with a complimentary dose of Dramamine: readers must supply their own.

One enthusiastic reviewer of *A Tale of Two Utopias* noted that Mr. Berman has described his religion as "Judeo-Whitmanian." Indeed. "I celebrate myself," Whitman wrote in his most famous poem: "I breathe the fragrance of myself, and know it and like it." Ditto Mr. Berman, though the Whitman on view here is less the vatic seer than the apostle of radical egalitarianism and "direct democracy," the author of *Democratic Vistas* somewhat more than the bard of "Song of Myself." It is in this context that we must understand Mr. Berman's description of himself as a "left-wing libertarian."

For all this, however, *A Tale of Two Utopias* is only intermittently autobiographical. In proposing to trace "the political journey of the generation of 1968," Mr. Berman is at the same time tracing his own political itinerary. But only rarely does he speak *in*

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propria persona. When he alludes, say, to a "vague new sensibility" that "managed to be trembly with expectation" or conjures "the dream of a genuine socialism, uncorrupted, untyrannical, de-Stalinized, ultra-democratic," he does so in the third person. In fact, *A Tale of Two Utopias* is a kind of spiritual-political credo disguised as a piece of intellectual history. Mr. Berman draws upon a motley agglomeration of persons and events in an effort to define a sensibility, the sensibility of a Sixties radical who is thoroughly disabused but not disillusioned. This imparts a certain schizoid quality to the book: Mr. Berman's evidence points in one direction, all his rhetoric in the opposite direction. Ostensibly, he sets out to investigate the unhappy logic of revolutionary utopianism, which always begins in moralistic self-infatuation and infallibly ends in disaster. "Are we," he asks, "to conclude that the idea of progress is the enemy of progress and that revolutionary exhilaration is drunkenness and folly, to be avoided at all cost?" The correct answer is "Yes," at least to the second part of the question. But Mr. Berman can never quite bring himself to admit it. Instead, he spins a fantasy—this book is indeed a "tale"—about noble aspirations that, if momentarily fulfilled here and there, have mostly gone badly awry. And yet . . .

Although embedded in a maddeningly digressive mound of second-hand historical trivia—it is clear that Mr. Berman is used to being paid by the word—the basic argument of this book is as simple as it is preposterous: namely, that the fall of Communism and the still tenuous rise of liberal democracy in parts of Eastern Europe and elsewhere are the adult rerun of the radical movements of the 1960s. Yes, really. In the aftermath of 1989, Mr. Berman says, it suddenly became "obvious that those long-ago utopian efforts to change the shape of the world were a young people's rehearsal, preparatory to adult events that only came later. Suddenly it was obvious that the authentic political revolution of our era was now, not then; liberal and democratic, not radical leftist in the '68 style; real, not imaginary." Obvious to him, that is. Contemplating the triumph of Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia (Havel is one of his heroes), he writes that

> the old hope of reorganizing the world on a drastically new and infinitely more democratic basis, the universal project, the grand aspiration for the poor and the downtrodden, *that* hope, the forbidden utopian dream, once again seemed, in its newly liberal and anti-grandiose version—well, thinkable.

It's utopianism on a fake diet. The moral is: Sixties radicals do not die; they are reborn as *New Yorker* writers and MacArthur Fellows.

Such, finally, is the burden of *A Tale of Two Utopias*: to show that liberal democracy, rooted though it is in capitalism and shot through with a suspicion of utopian enthusiasm, is somehow, really, at bottom, in its fundamental impulse—the latest version of utopia (though we mustn't call it that) and, moreover, a utopia that depends crucially on the "exhilaration" of a Sixties-style radicalism accoutered in the wariness of the 1990s.

This of course is putting it much more baldly than Mr. Berman deigns to do. Although *A Tale of Two Utopias* is very much a book with a thesis, it reads like what it is: four loosely knit essays united more by tone and sensibility than argument. Mr. Berman begins briefly enough with an introduction called "The Dream of a New Society." He here provides an insider's sketch of the "utopian exhilaration" that, he rightly notes, "swept across the student universe and across several adult universes as well" in and around 1968:

> the student uprisings, the building occupations, marches, strikes, battles with the police, the insurrections that were sexual, feminist, and gay, the bursts of ecological passion, the noisy entrance of the first mass of African-American students into the previously segre-

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> gated American universities, the slightly crazy effort to raise insubordination into a culture, to eat, dress, smoke, dance differently . . .

Mr. Berman's enthusiasm for what he accurately describes as "an insurrection in middle-class customs" is patent in every phrase. He is equally upbeat about the other Sixties revolutions he describes, the upsurge in pseudo-spirituality (*not* Mr. Berman's term)—the "bits and pieces of Buddhism, Beat poetry, transcendentalism, Mexican folklore, psychedelic mind expansions, and God knows what else"—as well as various more overt political agitations against "Western imperialism" and, in a few scattered places, Communist tyranny. Little if anything in Mr. Berman's discussion is new; the one element of novelty, here and throughout the book, is to present what is essentially a recapitulation as if it were a studied reassessment.

Consider Mr. Berman's ambitiously titled first chapter, "The Moral History of the Baby Boom Generation." Really, it ought to have been called "The Immoral History of the Baby Boom Generation." At some one-hundred pages, it is a long chapter, but nowhere near as long as it seems while reading it. In some ways, it is an extraordinary performance. "Every few decades," he tells us, "a pure flame of political rebellion shoots up somewhere and with amazing speed spreads in all directions, until half the countries on earth have been scorched." It happened in 1776; it happened in 1789; it happened in 1848; it happened in 1917; and, according to Mr. Berman, it happened again in 1968: the student rebellions of 1968, he says, were "one more instance of the same mysterious phenomenon, except on a bigger geographical scale than before." What is really mysterious is how someone with a college education could actually believe that the triumph of adolescent narcissism in 1968 has any important parallels with the American Revolution (to take just that one instance). Or perhaps this is the sort of thing that, these days, *only* someone with a college education could believe? In any event, Mr. Berman's important contribution to discussion of the infantilism of 1968 is to suggest that a "common theme" everywhere was . . . "the split between the young and the old." It's sad, really, but there it is: "The young people were eager for risk," Mr. Berman tells us, face apparently straight, "the elders, not. Ultra-radicalism versus left-wing caution was the crucial division." If pages could blush, *A Tale of Two Utopias* would be as pink as its author's sentiments.

For the rest, Mr. Berman meanders in a leisurely fashion among familiar signposts of the Sixties. He revisits the Port Huron statement ("longer than the *Communist Manifesto*" but "not as good") and the career of Tom Hayden, that one-time admirer of North Korea's Kim Il Sun who some people—friends, too—referred to as "the next Lenin." The Weather Underground and other such criminal groups get some attention. Mr. Berman has also read books about the student movements in Europe and Latin America, and he treats readers to a similar digest of events and personalities there: Pierre Goldman, André Glucksmann, Régis Debray; the Red Brigades, the Baader-Meinhof gang, the Sandinistas. Mr. Berman is far from uncritical of these people and movements; he speaks of "childish lives," of "criminal leftism," of movements going "mad." But all the criticism is advanced in an exonerating context of supposed "idealism." "Faraway solidarity became their religion. They said in effect: I struggle on behalf of others, therefore I am. . . . It was a grand idea, morally." Mr. Berman is very high on grand ideas, morally. "The young people wanted to redeem their souls. They wanted to leave behind the privileges and comforts of middle-class student life and go fight in the street and the universities for a better world." To be sure, the "protests and merry carnivals degenerated into guerrilla mayhem and Dostoyevskian persecutions," but nevertheless "freedom—what seemed like freedom, anyway—became visible."

Mr. Berman half-heartedly attempts to

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formulate a similar story in his second essay, "The Gay Awakening." Relying heavily on *Stonewall*, Martin Duberman's early history of the Gay Lib movement, and Bruce Bawer's *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society*, he outlines the extraordinarily rapid moral enfranchisement of homosexuality in American society. He has some mild criticisms to make of radical groups such as Queer Nation and Act-Up, which he thinks betray the beneficent motives of the original movement. But his libertarian sympathies make him an overwhelmingly enthusiastic supporter of this effort to politicize sexuality: "The gay movement was the most romantic political campaign that ever existed," he assures us; "It was a movement for the right to love. It was grand."

Most of Mr. Berman's book is merely pedestrian. It becomes almost comic in his third chapter, "Zappa and Havel." The Havel, of course, is Václav Havel of Czechoslovakia; the Zappa is the late Frank Zappa, for many years the leader of a rock 'n' roll band called the Mothers of Invention. The connection? It turns out that Mr. Havel was "a long-time fan of *Bongo Fury* and other albums" by Frank Zappa. Moreover, when Zappa—"the distinguished Frank Zappa," in Mr. Berman's words—visited Prague in January 1990, not only was he greeted by television crews and (his own estimate) some five thousand fans, but also he met with Mr. Havel to discuss matters of state and give him some advice.

At the center of Mr. Berman's chapter is the question of whether the United States has a legitimate "liberating role" in the world. For him, this is a hard one, if only because he thinks that "the line between liberating the world and enslaving the world is amazingly thin." Probably, it wouldn't help to tell Mr. Berman that it looks considerably less thin outside the precincts of left-wing indignation. He has some level-headed pages about the Communist conspiracy to cover up the fact that U.S. forces liberated the Czech town of Sušice. (According to the Soviets, it was the Red Army—cunningly disguised in American uniforms—that performed that service.) But the real burden of this chapter is to argue that rock music is an emancipatory political force and that Havel's taste for Frank Zappa, the Velvet Underground, and other such icons of rock culture is an important testimony to his stature as a leader. (According to Mr. Berman, Havel once declared that an album by the Velvet Underground "played a significant role" in Czechoslovakia's history.) He knowingly discusses the merits of Akord Klub, Plastic People of the Universe, and other Czech rock 'n' roll bands, concluding that in 1976 "rock and roll finally moved to the center of Czechoslovak politics." At last! Of course, Mr. Berman is hardly alone in identifying the destructive assault on music that goes under the name of rock 'n' roll as a beneficent American export. But I think he must be among the first to suggest, as he does here, that the question of whether the United States has a liberating role to play in the world can be answered by pointing to the likes of Frank Zappa.

Mr. Berman's long last chapter, "A Backward Glance at the End of History," begins by pondering some very large questions, to wit: whether there was some "larger meaning" (i.e., utopian impulse) that can be discerned in the liberal and national revolutions that broke out in 1989? Some "crucial truth about the nature of man and the shape of history"? Mr. Berman is almost as illuminating here as he was when he revealed that there was a "split between the young and the old" in the 1960s. He tells us now that his labors have yielded the following insight into the philosophy of history: that some people think that things change without order or meaning, while others believe that there is a discernible meaning in events and even progress to the pattern of history. Of course, it sounds silly when put like that; alas, that is precisely how Mr. Berman does put it. *Ipse dicit*: "There was the idea that things change . . . but without ever arriving

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at any kind of order or final shape. . . . And there was the idea that things change, and eventually the chaos adds up to progress." Easily worth the price of the book, that.

Mr. Berman spends approximately one-hundred pages mulling over this profound thought, using works by André Glucksmann (a former Maoist who advocates the history-is-chaos theory) and Francis Fukuyama (the famous neo-Hegelian who sees a pleasing shape to the course of history). He treats readers to a great deal of pointless biographical detail about both authors, and he then attempts a summary of their relevant works, Glucksmann's book *The 11th Commandment* and Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*. Two brief comments: I am no fan of Fukuyama's Hegelian fantasia. But to say, as Mr. Berman does, that his idea of progress charts "the same direction in world events that Whitman has invoked in his poetry and prose" is woefully to misunderstand both Whitman and Fukuyama. And what, finally, does Mr. Berman make of all this? He expresses a slight preference for the lively chaos espoused by André Glucksmann, but concludes thus: "The messages from these two authors . . . are at odds with one another, but since I am a critic and not a philosopher, I see no reason not to say that both messages seem true enough." No one, I think, will accuse Mr. Berman of being a philosopher. But even a critic might be expected to stop short of embracing blatant contradiction—unless, of course, he was a "Whitmanian" critic, in which case I suppose that contradiction need be no bar to affirmation.

At the end of his chapter on the baby boom generation, Mr. Berman speaks of his "bafflement" that "a movement so grand and touching in its motives as the student leftism of the 1960s could have degenerated and disappeared so quickly." He needn't be puzzled. The reason is not far to seek. The crucial thing to understand about the student (and faculty) leftism of the 1960s and 1970s is its hedonism and narcissistic self-absorption: that is the real explanation of its attack on middle-class values, its surrender to drugs and promiscuous sex, its infatuation with bogus forms of "spirituality," and its destructive dabbling in insurrectionary politics. Nor need Mr. Berman wax elegiac. Students may rarely stage sit-ins today. But the emancipatory ethos that he longingly evokes in these pages has not disappeared: it has been incorporated into the fabric of American life. It has transformed not only the university, but the media and every major cultural institution in this country. It has, in fact, succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of many of its early partisans. It is perhaps debatable whether, as Mr. Berman insists, "the left-wing idea . . . is a permanent feature of any reasonably modern society." But it is undeniably an ingrained feature of *our* society. Mr. Berman writes about the Sixties the way left-wing intellectuals write about Communism: as if it were a noble idea that somewhere, somehow went wrong. But neither Communism nor the radicalism of the 1960s went wrong: they were born wrong. Until Mr. Berman faces up to that uncomfortable fact, his utopian tales will continue to be just that: tales about nowhere.

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Pride & shame: the winning of the West

by James W. Tuttleton

Ken Burns's video series *The Civil War* and *The Game* have evidently reignited interest in the film documentary as a genre and turned our history (and the national pastime of the American people, baseball) into the stuff of public television. In making these films, he has given the National Endowment for the Arts something to cheer about (and to support), and PBS stations have recently had something more substantial to offer than lavishly decorated British costume dramas and Christiesque mystery shows. An instance of the new historical documentary is *In Search of the Oregon Trail*, narrated by Stacy Keach, recently broadcast by the Long Island PBS station, WLIW.

In producing his television series, Burns assembled a talented crew of filmmakers, and one of them, director Stephen Ives, has now launched his own production, *The West*, which was shown on PBS in September.[1] *The West* is a set of nine TV programs, totaling more than twelve and a half hours of video, exploring the American West through diaries, letters, journals of exploration, newspaper records, government documents, and first-person accounts of what it was like to venture into, explore, and try to settle the American West. Not omitted from these programs is the oral testimony of those Native Americans who were here first and who tried without success to resist the inundation of white migrants.

"The West" is a flexible notion that has meant different areas at different times in the colonial and federal history of this nation. The Puritans thought of the Connecticut River valley as the West. Later the West meant anything beyond the Alleghenies. But by "the West" Ives means that area of more than two million square miles west of the Mississippi, much of it acquired through Jefferson's purchase of the Louisiana territory from France, and the rest, like Texas and California, acquired from Spain or, like the Oregon territory, from Great Britain. The period covered in these films is from the earliest scattered sixteenth-century annals to about 1920. The main focus, though, is from about 1820 to 1890, when the frontier was officially closed.

The first point to be made about *The West* is that the photography is spectacular. The landscape of the region is breathtaking in its immensity and variety—including the near unimaginable vastness of the endless rolling prairies; the majestic rivers, cascades, geysers, and deep canyons; the towering, snow-crested Rocky Mountains, and the sometimes arid, sometimes beautiful, and very often lethal Western deserts. Ives gives us vivid panoramas of this majestic land-

1 *The West*, directed by Stephen Ives. Senior Producer: Ken Burns. Produced by Stephen Ives, Jody Abramson, and Michael Kantor. Written by Geoffrey C. Ward and Dayton Duncan. Narrated by Peter Coyote (Turner Home Entertainment, $19.98 per volume; $179.98 for the nine-volume set).

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scape in living color, as well as in black-and-white still photos of the place as it was when nineteenth-century settlers pushed into the West. Infused into these programs is that remarkable land-mystique about the West frequently to be found—from Frederick Jackson Turner onward—in romantic American thought. According to this view, it is the landscape itself that generated American democratic values and high-minded social ideals; and it is the greatness of the land that inspires Americans to a comparable moral greatness. Hence, the very landscape itself is a therapeutic and beneficent agency.

In my view no landscape can mean anything in the absence of people to inhabit it. Think of the aridity of the moonscape without the presence of Neil Armstrong or Buzz Aldrin. The story of the West is a story of largely open, uninhabited space; but its regions were never empty of people. In fact, the West came to boast its share of some of the most colorful personalities ever to have festooned the pages of the national biography. Ives presents brief biographical accounts of Kit Carson, Coronado, Sitting Bull, Wyatt Earp, Buffalo Bill Cody, John Sutter, Chief Joseph, Leland Stanford, General Custer, Brigham Young, Mark Twain, Red Cloud, and a host of others whose stories made the West a place of fantastic myth and international symbolism.

One of the old myths perpetuated in this series is that the Westerner is somehow more authentic than other Americans, that he is in fact the essential American. Of course this is nonsense, as the region is so vast as to have sustained a great diversity of peoples of all races and types, precluding a convincing definition of the "Westerner." Still, these TV programs give a rich iconography of Western portraits. The invention of the camera and the daguerreotype made available to us some of the most striking weathered faces ever photographed. Of course, for some of these Westerners, the necessity of holding still for several minutes during the long exposures gave the eyes a fixed and glassy, even a demented look. Sometimes the look corresponds to what we know of their actions.

What were those actions? Some, like those of John Brown in Kansas, *were* demented. Others were heroic, and others everything in between. Their actions were as various as the people. Ives has here given us brief chronicles of some of the most important historical events in the region: hair-raising exploratory ventures into the uncharted wilderness, like the 1533 Spanish explorations northward into unknown California, or the long Lewis and Clark expedition in search of the Northwest Passage that found instead the majestic Rockies. The story of the great cattle drives of the old Texas cowboys was fascinating to follow. And I was struck with the stupendous economic revolution produced by the 1849 discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California and of silver in Nevada. Ives is especially good at showing the antislavery skirmishing in the Missouri-Kansas border raids as abolitionists fought the Southerners who wanted to extend slavery clear to the Pacific.

Ives quite rightly notes that the story of the West is a story of conquest. At times it is the conquest of man over the harshest conditions of Nature—fire and flood, blizzard and drought. But more importantly it is about warfare. Noteworthy are his narrative accounts of epic battles such as the Alamo (1836), where Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, and a small band of Texans held off Santa Anna and his much superior Mexican army. Equally striking is Ives's account of the battle of Little Big Horn, where in 1876 Sitting Bull wiped out General Custer and his men.

We are also given historical accounts of remarkable social ventures like the establishment of the Mormon colony in the Utah territory, and the passing of the Homestead Act of 1862, which made free land available to millions of eager settlers. I was struck with Ives's account of the great technological and engineering feats, like the completion of the transcontinental railroad line in 1869, and the 1913 diversion of the

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whole Owens River into the Los Angeles reservoirs. One of the most important historical events was of course the slow disappearance of the Indian tribes in the face of the continuous, relentless migration of millions of Easterners, Europeans, Mexicans, and Chinese into the region.

In presenting his gallery of Western personalities and in recording these historical events that shaped the West, Ives has eschewed a straightforward, continuous narrative. He proceeds by what I can only call the snippet method. A typical program begins with the dissonance of an Indian chant, then an aerial view of Western landscapes, then a shot of three buffalo (the only ones left?) chased by a helicopter, or an introductory comment by one of the "talking heads." These are usually American historians, often ethnic-studies experts, or even descendants of those who lived in the region back then. Then we will have a few minutes on Brigham Young and the Mormon settlement, a few frames on polygamy, then a quick cut to the diminishing herd of buffalo, with a shift to delusional missionaries who thought they could Christianize the Indian, and then a cut to the sudden blizzards that buried the wagon trains. And the program will end with some prospectors scrabbling in the Nevada gold fields.

Ives's scattered themes are picked up and carried from program to program. The defect of his method is a surprising degree of repetition. But to bring the biographies alive, Ives quotes extensively from the letters and journals, the newspapers and government documents that illuminate his pioneer subjects. A great many celebrities were drafted to read these documents. Among those listed as "Voices" in *The West* are Jimmy Smits, Eli Wallach, Blythe Danner, Julie Harris, Derek Jacobi, George Plimpton, John Lithgow, and Arthur Miller. No one, it seems to me, reads as well as the series narrator, Peter Coyote, whose accent and delivery are perfect for this Western material.

Mostly implicit but sometimes explicit in Ives's work is the notion that one cannot understand the West as an actual entity in the national experience. For Ives the matter of the West has no essence or center. Instead, there are just stories or myths about Western experiences. There are as many different stories as there are Westerners with a tale to tell. For Ives all these stories are in competition with each other. In order to decenter the narrative of the West and to make sure that no one group gets to tell the story or dominate its transmission Ives employs his snippet method. Every minority group, every "marginalized" voice gets heard: the vanishing Indians, the dispossessed Mexicans in California, the sisterhood of Mormon women deprived of their polygamous marriages, the underpaid Chinese railway workers, the aggrieved Southern freedmen stranded in Kansas. All are given ample time to voice their complaint about how the nation—that is, how white Americans—have oppressed them. The idea that the past is a babel of contending voices that must all be heard prevents a clear grasp of the the major tendencies and larger historical developments of the region. But this notion dominates the academy nowadays and has evidently—through the writers and historians who appear on camera (T. H. Watkins, J. S. Holliday, Richard White, Jack Chen, Ronald Takaki, Martin Ridge, Ricardo Romo, Marc Reisner, and Bill Gwaltney among them)—shaped the thinking of Stephen Ives.

Despite the promiscuous use of the snippet method, however, what we are really offered in *The West* are not multiple narratives but a single underlying master narrative. That master narrative dilates on the supposed illegitimacy of the expansion of the American peoples into the West and the shame that all Americans must feel about our treatment, throughout the history of the West, of various minority groups—blacks, Mexicans, Chinese, Indians, etc. This politically correct motif is not developed at length; it is broken up into hundreds of small vignettes, and stray asides.

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There is so much shame-mongering infused into the nine programs that I cannot give a full accounting of it here. But some comment about Ives's presentation of the fate of the American Indian will have to serve for the whole.

The theme of the illegitimate American appropriation of the West is announced at the outset in the claim of Chief Joseph, of the Nez Percé tribe of Oregon, that the Indian has a right to live on the land. The hospitality of various Indian tribes to early explorers is often touched on. Appreciative accounts are given of the richness of Indian culture, the freedom of Indian life, the spirituality of their religion, and Indian reverence for nature. The American Indian writer, N. Scott Momaday, gives masterly interpretations of Indian legends and myths in a voice charged with rueful melancholy. Pathos is in fact the dominating affect of the whole video series: the past was so sad. In any case, it will seem inconceivable to the innocent viewer that white Americans could have wished to be protected from Indians by Federal troops, or have urged that they be restricted to reservations, that treaties be abrogated, or that war be waged upon them. How could the point have been eventually reached where the Eureka *Herald* called for the extermination of the Indian?

The answer to this question involves both the nature of Indian character and life and the prior history of Indian-white relations in the East. Well before the West was ever explored, colonial Americans had an informed knowledge of Indian character. One Indian trait is only lightly touched on in *The West*: the admission that war was the highest calling of the Indian peoples. In the narrow Indian tribal view, all outsiders were enemies, and therefore ripe for the war party and the hatchet. We hardly hear, in Ives's account, that the Apaches hated the Navajos, that both hated the Pueblos, and that Comanches and Kiowas lusted for each other's scalps. Savage hatred for these new white men was nothing special.

The West presents a great deal of Indian mysticism, a great many tales of what the animals tell us, and a lot of drum and breathy flute music. But here and there the odd reference makes vividly plain why whites found it impossible to coexist peacefully with Indians. It lay in the Indian lust for war—a constant factor in tribal life stretching back into prehistory. Especially revealing is the brief reference in the second program to the ongoing vicious battles amongst the Kiowas, Cheyennes, and Lakotas for control of the Black Hills hunting ground. Charlotte Black Elk, a Lakota descendant, gives the game away in her rather proud recollection that her ancestors formed a warrior society and that it was a badge of tribal honor to be feared and hated by the other tribes and by whites. Any young man who did not kill and scalp in war was ridiculed in the tribe as effeminate. Indeed, no young woman would have a brave who had not proved himself in war. Such attitudes prevented peaceable relations between Indian and Indian, and Indian and white.

In consequence of Indian bellicosity—something that *The West* is too pusillanimous to criticize—whites who settled overly close to the tepees often suffered the horrors of the scalping party. But only once or twice do we hear of the farmers that were butchered, their noses slit, genitals hacked, bodies mutilated. Only once or twice in twelve and a half hours do we hear of the assaulted wagon trains, the raped and kidnapped women, or the many homesteads burnt to the ground. In one telling section called "This Guilty Land," U.S. Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell inadvertently reveals that successive peace treaties negotiated between whites and peacemaking elders had to fail—had to fail because, to the younger braves, the making of peace represented a denial of their manhood, and they were not about to be feminized by the circulating peace pipe.

Yet Ives and his politically correct historians make no effort to reach a moral judgment about the bloodlust that animated the Indian people, who were in fact

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still living in the Stone Age. Instead we find a great many sentences like this one from episode four, "Death Runs Riot": "A Cheyenne chief who wanted nothing but peace would find no escape as time and again his unsuspecting village became a battlefield." Like as not it became a battlefield because of some kidnapped white women or children imprisoned in the camp, as hostages held for ransom. In fact, the Cheyenne wanted peace only after defeat in battle or after their bloodlust had been sated.

The most striking viewpoints espoused in these programs, however, are not those of the historians. There are a great many interviews worth quoting, but I find especially worth reflection three comments, one by Stewart L. Udall, former Secretary of the Interior; one by (of all people) Ann Richards, former governor of Texas; and one by Albert White Hat, a contemporary Lakota. Udall, descended from persecuted Mormon settlers, argues convincingly that "the settlers are the real heroes, yes, yes, indeed. In this harsh country, much of it harsh and forbidding and demanding, a tough country, the fact that people could go there and establish communities and make a living for themselves and build up societies, I think that was a real triumph." Udall rightly puts the emphasis on the creation of communities, the development of society, and the westward march of a civilization with shared values and noble ideals.

The settlement of the West exacted a heavy price from both the winners and the losers, but I think that Ann Richards, descended from those original rowdy Texas cowboys, is wise in remarking:

> Prejudice and destruction as a consequence of war and destruction is not a pretty picture. But it is the story of all places, all nations. No matter where in the world, it is the story of conquering, great sacrifice, great loss, and a lot of times the taking away of things belonging to somebody else. But even knowing all of that, and wishing that that part of it were not there cannot take away the spirit and idealism and excitement that people felt that actually did it and that we still feel when we think about them doing it.

Indeed, it would take a dour pessimist not to admit that out of the great drama of Western settlement has evolved a nation of the highest moral and social ideals, however imperfect Americans may be in fulfilling them.

In this respect, Albert White Hat, a Lakota trained in youth in the Christian schools, speaks the wisdom gained of experience. In the 1960s, when he decided to reappropriate his Indian identity, he let his hair grow and brooded long on the massacre of Indians at Wounded Knee and Sand Creek and on the tragic fate of his people. His anger made him want to get out his rifle, go on a rampage, and kill all the whites he could find. But the lust for revenge, he came to discover, was too tall an order for any individual Indian nowadays and could only lead to drunkenness or self-destruction. The only way to come to terms with the history of his people, said Albert White Hat, was forgiveness. The same must be said for all of us, whether white, Mexican-American, Chinese-American, or whatever. It is this notion of forgiveness and reconciliation, an idea at the very heart of a culture that still has a claim to be called Judeo-Christian, that makes it possible for us to live amicably together today under the rule of law.

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The mimetic brilliance of Angus Wilson

by Brooke Allen

Earlier this year, Angus Wilson's finest novel, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, was reissued by St. Martin's Press.[1] Along with his other fiction, it has been out of print in this country since 1985. That one of the oddest and most fascinating bodies of work in postwar literature should have been so long ignored is shocking; so is the fact that its author, an elderly and respected knight, should have died penniless.

Throughout his life, Wilson was fascinated by Dickens, with whom he was frequently compared. The similarities are obvious enough: lavish histrionic gifts; a genius for mimicry; a fascination with the intensity of childhood experience; an uncanny ability to cut across class boundaries based on a rackety, *déclassé* childhood. Yet Dickens was a great popular writer, while Wilson's books remained a fairly esoteric taste. The most fundamental difference would seem to lie in sentiment; it was a condiment that Dickens used generously and fearlessly, Wilson sparingly and with a kind of bleak honesty. The British, in the postwar years, "had been congratulating themselves smugly on having won the war, and Angus exposed them to themselves as a nation of beggars, snobs, bullies, black-marketeers and hypocrites, ill-dressed, plain, timid, and adventurous only in pursuit of selfish ends: it was not a flattering portrait."

So writes Margaret Drabble in her satisfying new biography[2] of the writer who, she claims, strongly influenced her own work and that of a number of her contemporaries including Ian McEwan and Martin Amis. It is to be welcomed, for many reasons. For one thing, it is the first extensive biographical treatment of Sir Angus; the only directly autobiographical work he himself wrote was the extremely slim volume *The Wild Garden*, published in 1963 when Wilson was fifty, and covering only his childhood and youth.

Also, the fact is that Wilson led an unusual life. He seems to have been in agreement with Tocqueville that "no man can struggle with advantage against the spirit of his age and country," for he threw himself into the spirit of his century, participating enthusiastically in the social revolutions that took place during his own lifetime (though at all times retaining his intelligent skepticism). As a homosexual, and a fairly outspoken one, he saw the world transformed for people like himself, and his story is, as Drabble emphasizes, "in part a history of what we now call gay liberation, and the decreasing need for discretion."

Finally, Wilson was obviously a man of considerable personal charm. Not that he was what anyone would call a handsome man. An old school-friend describes him in

1 *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, by Angus Wilson; St. Martin's Griffin, 352 pages, $14.95.

2 *Angus Wilson: A Biography*, by Margaret Drabble; St. Martin's Press, 716 pages, $35.

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youth: "Retreating forehead, retreating hair, the back of his head, in silhouette, a wavy question mark; little round watery eyes sparkling with cultured joviality; a rather small white nose which tried hard to apologise for its presence on his face . . . a lightly receding chin, a high-pitched consequential voice." A distinctly camp manner completed the picture. As a young man, he was said to look like something out of the retinue of Marie Antoinette; as he aged, with his mane of prematurely white hair, he came to bear a marked resemblance to Margaret Rutherford. One friend unkindly described him, in his dotage, as "half . . . Old King Cole, half Sugar Plum Fairy."

Vivacious, curious, cultivated, he consistently charmed and amused. His students (and he had many, not only at the University of East Anglia where he taught for years, but at numerous American universities where he did stints as a visiting professor) adored him. One pupil later said that he "made up in angelic sweetness of manner for all we lacked in genius." He was known to be an easy touch for any good cause. He even enjoyed publicity tours, the bane of more timid authors' careers: "With me it's the old actress thing really," he explained to V. S. Naipaul. "There are all those lovely people out there: you reach out and make contact with them."

Angus Wilson was always an autobiographical novelist, and like Dickens he found the principal wellspring for his fiction in his own childhood. It was, indeed, a childhood bizarre enough to rival anything in Dickens's life or work.

Willie Johnstone-Wilson (his son Angus was to drop the Johnstone upon the publication of his first book) was a real-life Micawber. "If my father had ever known employment one might have spoken of him as in retirement," Wilson wrote in *The Wild Garden*. Except for a brief flirtation with the law, Willie trained for no career, and never, apparently, did a day's work. Having come from a once-distinguished Scottish family, he decided to live as a Gentleman of No Occupation on the income from the family's Dumfriesshire estate—a source that was never adequate and became, with the years, less and less so. He spent his days at the race track, the Gaity, the Trocadero, or his club, a small-scale *rentier* gambling his funds away and living well beyond his means.

Willie married Maud Ellen Caney, a good-looking young woman from a prosperous Durban family of whom, since she had social pretensions and they had made their money in trade, she was ashamed. The newlyweds settled in Richmond where their eldest son, Frederick (Fred) was born. They produced four more in fairly short order: Winn (1892), Clive (1894), Colin (1897), and Patrick (1900). They thought their family complete, and the birth of Angus on August 11, 1913, when his closest brother was thirteen and his mother forty-five, was a surprise. Angus spent his first years in Bexhill-on-Sea on the South Coast. Spoiled and precocious, as Drabble describes it, "he belonged to no generation."

Amazingly, all of Angus's brothers survived World War I. The most eccentric, and those with the most powerful influence on the young Angus, were Colin and Pat, a strange, interdependent pair who were to live together until their deaths as elderly men in cheap lodgings in Lisbon. From his earliest childhood Angus was aware that both Pat and Colin were homosexual. They involved him, as a very small boy, in their charades and dramatic tableaux (all of the Johnstone-Wilsons were enthusiastic playactors) most of which revolved round stories of executed royalty, principally Marie Antoinette or Mary Queen of Scots; years later, Angus was to describe them in an *Observer* article as "queenly." As they grew up, they did not confine their activities to the histrionic but went to work as prostitutes, supplementing their extremely slender means by propositioning clients while dressed in ladies' underwear. Their experiences would reappear as those of the young Marcus Matthews in *No Laughing Matter*.

After a couple of years spent in South Africa unsuccessfully seeking greener pas-

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tures, Angus and his parents returned to England in 1924 and once more took up their by now hopelessly raffish existence—"genteel poverty" in a succession of seedy lodgings which "my mother enjoined us to call 'private hotels.'" As grim as this life must have been for the young Wilson, the sense of displacement and the weird assortment of human flotsam with which he came into contact was to prove a fruitful source of experience for his fiction. One of his fictional alter egos is Meg Eliot, the upper-middle-class heroine of *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot*, who has lost her husband and her money and avoids Kensington hotels as "emblems of the plucky reduced gentility she feared"; Willie and Maud reappear, unflatteringly, as the improvident and narcissistic parents in *No Laughing Matter*. In *The Wild Garden*, Wilson observed that

> the very small scale *rentier* and professional group to which my family belonged had no place in Labour's England and was subsequently to prove the most expendable element of the Tory Party's supporters when the Conservatives began to convert social-welfare England into an affluent opportunity society. My attitude to this social revolution was inevitably ambivalent, my affections often in conflict with my reason; this is reflected in my stories.

Fortunately brother Winn—the only respectable member of the Johnstone-Wilson family—had founded a boys' school, Ashampstead, and Angus was a pupil there from 1924 to 1927. It was an unconventional and rather happy school, but a pall was cast over it by Winn's cadging family who, Wilson wrote, "made my poor headmaster brother's life nightmarish as [they] borrowed his livelihood away." Despite what appears to have been really good schoolmastering—Winn was a fine teacher and so, it seems, was the ladylike Pat—the Johnstone-Wilson ménage at Ashampstead was "a melancholy, Chekhovian house, for there my family sat about and talked the hours away like people waiting for a long overdue train."

For Angus alone of all her sons, Maud financed a real education. She found the money to send him to Westminster School, where he began in 1927, and provided in her will for the continuation of his education after her death in 1929. Westminster turned out to be an inspired choice: it was a school where intellect counted for much more than athletic prowess, and there was none of the bullying that went on at "heartier" schools. There were a number of first-rate teachers, of whom the most influential to Wilson was the energetic John Edward Bowle. Bowle not only had interesting friends, he made sure that his boys benefited from them: thus as a teenager Wilson met Bertrand Russell, Aldous Huxley, H. G. Wells, and even Gandhi. "I nearly died of mental indigestion under the diet of Spengler, Croce, Roger Fry, Freud, Cole, Gerald Heard . . . and all that [Bowle] provided," wrote Wilson.

A great success at Westminster, Wilson nevertheless failed to get the expected Hinchcliffe scholarship to Christ Church; instead he went up to Merton, as a commoner, on the strength of his mother's legacy. His years at Oxford were happy but not very eventful. He was active in the Oxford University Dramatic Society, where his most memorable performance was as Buggery in a tableau of the Seven Deadly Sins, "wearing flame-colored pajamas and carrying a madonna lily" (Terence Rattigan appeared as Treachery in the same pageant). He took his degree in history—a Second—in 1935.

His prospects were not good. He now had sole care of Willie, who had become a frail and dependent old man. The economy was depressed and job prospects were poor; on top of which, as Drabble points out, "many professions were not open to someone who could not disguise a camp manner." After an absurd interlude as amanuensis to a dilettante lady who wanted to write her memoirs, Wilson applied for work at the British Museum, and in early 1937 he began his career there as a "temporary assistant cataloguer" in the Department of Printed Books.

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A year later Willie Johnstone-Wilson died, and Angus began to emerge from his chrysalis. Having for years played the role of good daughter (as Colin spitefully observed), his development had been delayed: "Prematurely responsible in some ways, he had been mildly (and willingly) retarded in others, like many a dutiful spinster"—a situation Wilson would describe with special insight in his early "A Story of Historical Interest." His circle of friends widened, and he joined a political crowd, "very red" as one of its members recalls. He shifted his support from the Peace Pledge Union to Stafford Cripps's "United Front of the Working Class to fight Fascism and War" and kept himself occupied with what he was later to describe as "that most satisfactorily escapist of all activities—busy political work."

> The busy comradeship, the endless political talk of those years did in fact use up the blank time which might otherwise have driven me to think a little more deeply. In addition this left-wing work gave me a certain moral satisfaction which in turn delayed any serious self-analysis. . . . We generated with our lively political talk and coterie jokes a somewhat cosy warmth in which I, at any rate, was able to doze off while believing I was living an intense, engaged existence.

Wilson spent much of the war at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire, the wartime operational headquarters of the Government Code and Cypher School. His activities there remain secret—it is not even known whether his work was high or low level; more importantly to Wilson's own life, it was there that he suffered a rather severe breakdown. The details of this nervous collapse are vague both in Drabble's treatment and in *The Wild Garden*, but one of its elements, which Wilson would recreate dramatically in Bernard Sands's breakdown in *Hemlock and After*, was a shocking self-realization, specifically the discovery of a streak of cruelty—even sadism—in himself. "I had always thought of myself as a person of unusual gentleness and a natural liking for other human beings. I now learnt that I could hate intimately, if not for long periods, and that I was capable of cruelty, indeed addicted to it, particularly towards those who attracted me most strongly."

Whether or not this period of Wilson's life was the source, it is notable that in each of his novels it is self-knowledge, of all possible human achievements, that poses the ultimate hurdle and test. Gerald Middleton in *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* is a prisoner of his own weak will, until he faces up, not only to the part he unwillingly played in a scholarly hoax many decades earlier, but to his many failures in human relationships; when he does, as an elderly man, he is given a new and undreamed-of measure of freedom. The sudden advent of self-knowledge to Bernard Sands in *Hemlock and After*, on the other hand, is so intense and appalling that it kills him. The same pattern, with differing results, is repeated in each novel.

Wilson's obsession with self-knowledge, with facing up to one's own truth, must also have sprung in large part from his disgust at his upbringing within his mother's Christian Science faith. He saw Mrs. Eddy's teachings as investing every human act with an aura of utterly false sweetness and love. "I know well," he wrote, "the unreal sweetness that hangs around that Church. It would be hard to choose a creed—and it was that of Lady Astor and Lord Lothian—better fitted to play into the hands of Hitler's gang. It is never, I suppose, very wise to deny the existence of evil, but it was particularly unwise from 1933 to 1939." In *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot*, Meg's vision of the empty, hostile desert stretched out in every direction beneath her airplane is interrupted by an absurd old lady opposite who spouts cozy Christian Science platitudes. And many of Wilson's most baneful characters—Ingeborg Middleton in *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, for instance, or the procuress Mrs. Curry in *Hemlock and After*, affect a grotesquely whimsical manner. Any Wilson character who uses the word "loving" is automatically suspect.

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With the end of the war, Wilson's fortunes almost immediately improved. He had moved to a cottage in the village of Little Hadham during the war and there he began—in an almost offhanded manner—his career as a writer. "I never wrote anything—except for the school magazine—until November, 1946," he later told *The Paris Review*. "Then I wrote a short story one weekend—'Raspberry Jam'—and followed that up by writing a short story every weekend for twelve weeks. I was then thirty-three. My writing started as a hobby." On a visit to Little Hadham, Wilson's friend Robin Ironside read the work and, impressed, showed it to Cyril Connolly, to whom Wilson, like so many authors of the period, was to owe his initial success: "Mother's Sense of Fun" appeared in Connolly's *Horizon* in November 1947, "Crazy Crowd" the following April. In March 1949, Secker & Warburg brought out the whole collection as *The Wrong Set and Other Stories*, to considerable acclaim. Sean O'Faolain wrote, "He has already written some of the best satirical stories of his generation. . . . he is already completely *déniaisé*, though without, thank goodness, losing his pity or his feeling. It may be this rare combination of sharp wit and soft heart that makes one reader at least believe that this is a man marked out for fame." John Betjeman, Philip Toynbee, and Frank O'Connor agreed, and the book sold out its print run in two weeks.

Wilson was moving up in the hierarchy of the British Museum, too. In 1950 he was made Deputy Superintendent of the Reading Room, an extremely congenial position to him. He quickly became a fixture, still remembered vividly by many former readers. Drabble writes, "His elevation placed him conspicuously on a raised dais in the centre of the Reading Room beneath Panizzi's beautiful dome, a colourful bird in a vast circular cage, bow-tied, blue-rinsed, chattering loudly to readers and staff and friends on the telephone. . . . He never ever said 'Shh!' "

In December 1945, Wilson had noticed a handsome young assistant at the Museum. He was Anthony Garrett, an intelligent boy from a lower-middle class background who had had to leave school at sixteen without the higher education he had hoped for. Wilson was involved elsewhere at the time, but he definitely took an interest. Their relationship gradually developed until, by around 1950, they had become an established couple. They were to remain so until Wilson's death forty years later.

Tony emerges from Drabble's narrative as an almost saintly character. For decades, with unfailing and impeccable manners he played what Wilson himself described as "the difficult role that is seldom perfectly played—the celebrity's helpmate." It was not to be an easy one. Though Tony acquired credentials in social work and launched himself into a career as Probation Officer in the Metropolitan Magistrates Court—a job he enjoyed and performed well—widespread gossip over his relationship with Wilson forced him, in 1960, to resign. From that moment, he became Wilson's full-time secretary and chauffeur, as well as being his companion.

Gay helpmates of celebrities, of course, tended to get even shorter shrift with the public than celebrity wives. From Paris, Nancy Mitford (a friend of Angus's and herself hardly prejudiced against homosexuals) wrote to a correspondent:

> There is a new problem for the hostesses here do you have it? which is this. Chaps ring up and say can they bring their homosexual wives. "You know Hans, you met him at so-and-so's" or "Roberto who is staying with me" or one just said "my partner" like a deb dance. Then these fearful gorillas appear. They have no conversation & are not even pretty or not to ONE anyway. . . . What do you do in London?

Unlike these apes, Tony, who was intelligent and personable, was popular with Angus's friends; still, he spent many an evening waiting with the car while Angus was being lionized at some gala event.

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Wilson's second volume of stories, *Such Darling Dodos*, was published in 1950. Again, it was greeted with enthusiasm. In the *Sunday Times*, C. P. Snow wrote: "Part-bizarre, part-macabre, part-savage and part-maudlin, there is nothing much like it upon the contemporary scene." Others, such as John Osborne, concurred. Wilson was turning out to be a writer fascinatingly difficult to classify: while he was still (as he was to remain) passionately liberal and nominally left-wing, he disliked left-wing self-deception as much as he did the right-wing variety, and didn't mind exposing his disdain. *Such Darling Dodos* shows a chilly skepticism about progressive ideals and Labour Party dogmas. "I was struck then," he later wrote, "by the fact that a mild social revolution had taken place in England overnight. . . . Readers and critics alike responded to this aspect of my stories. Indeed it earned me a reputation for being a 'social satirist,' which seems to me only an aspect of my writing."

Wilson's *Emile Zola: An Introductory Study of his Novels* was published in 1952. He was to write two more literary biographies, *The World of Charles Dickens* (1970) and *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling* (1977). Dickens and Kipling and, to a lesser extent Zola, were writers who fascinated him not only in their own right but because, as he was aware, he shared many qualities with them. All three are good biographies, *Kipling* particularly fine, and, considering the period it was written, with Kipling's reputation beginning to reach its miserable nadir, particularly sympathetic.

Hemlock and After, Wilson's first novel, was also published in 1952. It is the story of an elderly and popular novelist, Bernard Sands, whose two lives as a married public figure and a secret homosexual lead him into impossible contradictions. Through a combination of selfishness and wrong principle, Bernard fails his wife, children, and ultimately the young man he loves; finally, his recognition of his own dark side kills him.

Though the novel seems rather incomplete and awkward compared with the more expert *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, which was to follow, it is alive with talent and with the author's own unusual sensibility: Evelyn Waugh read it three times and wrote Wilson a fan letter. *Hemlock and After* was also of interest in that it dealt with themes that had seldom been handled openly in the English novel. It is one of the first novels to deal with homosexual life, and the homosexual world, quite casually. Wilson was highly flattered when E. M. Forster wrote expressing his interest in the book and discussing various points in it, but his disenchantment with Forster and his values was already beginning. Forster's style of humanism, with its emphasis on the primacy of human relationships, seemed to him inadequate, and as the years went on he came to feel that the elderly Forster, who wielded more moral authority, possibly, than any other writer in England, should have had the courage to "come out" at long last.

While in early days, at least, Wilson did not advertize his own homosexuality to the public, he made no effort to hide it either. A series of homosexual scandals in the 1950s—Guy Burgess's flight in 1951, John Gielgud's arrest in 1953, Alan Turing's suicide in 1954, and the Montagu case the same year—were bringing the question of the legalization of homosexuality into the public consciousness. Later in the decade, Wilson would serve on the Executive Committee of the Homosexual Law Reform Society, and sign a letter to the London *Times* in support of the recommendations of the Wolfenden report. Throughout the Sixties and Seventies, he would support gay rights, though he didn't like the word "gay," and balked at being referred to on television as Tony Garrett's "lover"—surely at his age, he asked, "friends" would do just as well?

His sexuality, at any rate—combined with his peripatetic childhood—gave him one professional advantage, for gay culture cut across class boundaries in a way unknown to straight England. Wilson made full use of the knowledge this afforded him, and indeed, in his mimetic brilliance, his ability to

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assume the voice of charwoman, spiv, or society hostess, he was unequalled in his generation.

In 1955 Wilson began writing *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, a novel that was to be far longer and more complex than anything he had attempted before. Its challenges were such that Wilson resigned his post at the British Museum, thus giving up the financial security that had meant so much to him. It was not a decision he was ever to regret, yet, because his novels provided an inadequate income, it meant that for the rest of his life he would have to come up with alternative means of making a living, a process that became more and more difficult as he aged.

Anglo-Saxon Attitudes is indubitably the finest of Wilson's novels. It is the most skillful and controlled, the most firmly focused upon its principle theme, and at the same time the one with the broadest, and most vivid, social scope. "It is because I wanted to create [a] sense of 'life' that I have often used sub-plots and other such old-fashioned devices," Wilson later commented. "Some novelists try to make the magic work by taking you deep down inside one person. I try to multiply the worlds I put into the books." In *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* he succeeded superbly. Its hero, Gerald Middleton, is about as unlike Wilson himself as it is possible to be—an elderly, introverted academic with a distinguished military bearing, and a moral defeatist of long standing. The novel fans out into expanding circles of odd characters: medievalists, archaeologists, a violent Futurist poet, an old-fashioned "county" girl, an aspiring French bourgeoise, a self-deluded television personality. Most memorable, perhaps, is the raffish homosexual waiter Vin Salad and his grandmother, an insinuating charwoman.

Wilson is not afraid of making his creatures appear in a grotesque light, and some readers have disliked what they see as being unremittingly ugly or unpleasant. William Plomer, for instance, admired Wilson's cleverness but complained that his stories seemed to him "like the work of a hysterical misanthrope and misogynist, screaming like an ape that can't get out of its smelly cage." Wilson resisted this sort of evaluation. "Vulgarities, lack of discrimination, weaknesses . . . appear to me widespread and no more than venial beside the real wickedness of life," he objected. "I really don't know why people find my characters unpleasant. I believe—perhaps it would be different if I were religious—that life is very difficult for most people and that most people make a fair job of it." Nevertheless, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* boasts some of the most monumentally, and delightfully, unpleasant characters in modern literature: Ingeborg Middleton, Gerald's maudlin and self-deluding wife, who affects the demeanor of a gigantic and self-pitying baby; the "Quilpish" Yves Houdet, a vulgarian, a bore, and a sadist; Gerald's narcissistic son-in-law Donald Consett, whose nearest approach to a smile is when a fish would seem momentarily to flash behind his glasses.

The trick that Wilson pulls off is in making these grotesques believable within the atmosphere of his novel. It was a test he would fail in *No Laughing Matter* (1967), possibly his best novel after this one, in which the characters—based closely, perhaps too closely, upon his own family—get so exaggerated and the prose so mannered that some readers must have given up early, sated on bile. Wilson was accomplished at producing realistic fiction—*The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot* is a realistic book, and *Late Call* (1964), the story of an elderly hotel manageress retired to live with her upwardly mobile son in a semi-utopian "New Town" is a particularly fine novel in the realistic tradition—but realism as such was not his primary aim. He had no compunction, for instance, about naming two of his gossiping crones Mrs. Wrigley and Mrs. Crawley.

> I have never felt called upon to declare allegiance to either fantasy or realism. They proceed from two different levels of my imagination and without their fusion I could not

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> produce a novel. However, if I must choose between two necessities I should consider the "real" as the less essential. . . . The purpose of my book about Zola, who notoriously depended upon exact fact for the stimulation of his imagination, was to show that what mattered was the nature of his imagination, not the facts that stimulated it.

His last two novels, *As If by Magic* (1973) and *Setting the World on Fire* (1980) departed from realism so drastically—and unsuccessfully—as to alienate most of his readers.

With the 1960s dawned, as Drabble says, "the age of the conference," and Wilson was one of the most energetic conference-goers of the age. Throughout the Sixties and Seventies, he was on the move—sometimes on pleasure trips to the Far East or North Africa, but usually on some sort of official business, speaking at writers' conferences or PEN or British Council functions, or serving as a visiting professor in numerous American universities. Such engagements were absolutely essential in providing supplementary income (Wilson, a critical success, had never been a big seller, and with the exception of *Late Call*, which was adapted for television by Dennis Potter, none of his books were sold to the movies or TV during his lifetime). Drabble's narrative loses a good deal of its drama at this point; at least 50 percent of her exhaustive recitation of official dinner parties and cocktail parties is unnecessary.

But not all of this is dull. One point of interest is Wilson's sheer virtuosity on the podium. As one observer noted, he could "deliver an hour-long lecture at the rate of at least 150 words a minute (that is, very fast) in all some 9000 words, with the aid of nothing but three or four sentences scrawled on a piece of note paper." (Wilson had a couple of successful moments as a television interviewer, but was deemed "too queer" to employ regularly.)

Wilson's conference-going was to influence his political orientation. As early as the 1940s, he had been disillusioned by left-wing self-delusion, and though he remained a liberal throughout his life his later experiences only confirmed his early skepticism. In 1963 he was horrified, at a writers' conference in Leningrad, by the obvious lies and veiled threats being conveyed by Soviet officials (his own experience and impressions are given to Quentin Matthews in *No Laughing Matter*). From this moment he became markedly anti-Soviet, even detaching himself from the anti-apartheid movement as it clearly became an instrument of Soviet foreign policy. After a 1965 visit to Czechoslovakia, Wilson expressed his deepening disgust with "life at the Communist top—the heavy banquets, the bonhomie, the drink, the carefully dowdy sexy women, the threats veiled in joviality, the chauffeured car."

Wilson's last years were sad ones, though they were launched happily enough with a knighthood in 1980 (Wilson was surprised, and, being "under no illusion that Mrs. Thatcher personally admired his work," thought it probable that she didn't know who he was). But Wilson aged early, and was already infirm by the time he was seventy. At this juncture, he and Tony made a fatally ill-advised decision to move to the South of France. It quickly became evident that Wilson was really ill with what would turn out to be hydrocephalus: his sense of balance was degenerating and bouts of mental disorientation and paranoid delusions were becoming frequent. Tony became a round-the-clock nurse, for without spare cash they could not afford help.

After a very long and pitiful decline, Angus Wilson died, nearly destitute, on May 31, 1991, at Pinford End House, a nursing home near Bury St. Edmunds. Tony Garrett, who had sought financial help for Angus, refused it for himself. He lived monastically, and in 1994 was received into the Roman Catholic Church.

Reflecting upon the years of work he had put into his biography of Kipling, Wilson had come to the conclusion that no biog-

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rapher can really hope to successfully invade another human personality. This epitaph on biography is certainly applicable to Drabble's own effort, sustained and impressive though it is. Wilson's personality was, obviously, a far more complex and dark one than his butterfly surface implied. Drabble acknowledges Wilson's unpleasant aspects, frequently exposed by the hysteria that often came too close to the surface, the sadistic streak, and the depression and insecurity. Nevertheless, this dark side repeatedly eludes her, and in the end it is Wilson's sunny, chattering, charming *persona* that remains so clearly in the reader's mind. Perhaps this is just as well, and will serve to attract new readers to Wilson's eccentric and intelligent fiction.

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Poems *by W. S. Di Piero, Richard Tillinghast & Rachel Hadas*

Teenage girl in moonlight

for my daughter

You noticed it before I did,
the flat spot
in the moon's low corner
(or quadrant)
caused maybe by a cloud, you said,
or some disturbance we can't see.
While you looked up at it,
from your feet
the long black plank
of form and flesh
stretched in shadow behind you.
You must have felt its pull,
because you turned
from the flawed moon
and faced it,
like something you'd forgotten there.

I felt real happiness and pain
for your time in the world,
where it's easy
to feel two things, both sharp, at once.
Caught between your shade
and source of light,
you smiled.
It seemed

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you knew, as you'd not known before,
that it was you,
singular, selfed.

The moon changes
in and through you now.
Tide. Wave.
I want to catch you
where you stand,
in something more than words.
But you're beyond my wish, too, now,
into yourself,
living into some life
of strange time past this one we share,
strange and all your own,
where your moons
will plane away
the details of your presence.
The pillars that your bluejeans make.
The cotton blouse roughened around your heart.

—*W. S. Di Piero*

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Bijou and Majestic

Snow from the first of November, snow
Darkening the already dark December
Sky over Montpelier. We stamped into the Bijou
Through slush, having nowhere to go other
Than my aunt's, or back to the farm. Images
Blizzarded through unfiltered smoke out of the
Fluttery projector's light-beam—
Hollywood soup for a twenty-below afternoon.

Satin flowed along Harlowe's thighs, men
In smoking jackets fingered cigarette holders,
B-52s droned low over Tokyo amid wet wool
Indoors-smells steaming in the stalls of the Bijou.

Out on the main street as evening closed in
We walked back together wrapped
In the full dark of the Green Mountains,
Haloed by our breath, upstairs to that little
Maid's room your job at the Majestic
Gave you, and an iron bed with white sheets.

If I were still young and stupid enough
I would try to say
what we were to each other then.

The Green Mountains whitened at the rim
Of our awakening, through a diamond-shaped window,
Its frame painted summer-camp green.

—Richard Tillinghast

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Fleshly answers

Doomed beauties, my companions, my familiars,
your long arms braceleted with snakes of danger,

a question twines in all the undergrowth.
How can we tell the living from the dead?

Puvis de Chavannes's tall pearly figures
dressed as sturdy Spartans at the chase

turn out to be pale paper dolls in space.
And how can we be sure that we're alive?

Our bodies, aging, changing, slow and stiffen.
On flesh if not yet quite inert increasingly opaque,

bite or bruise or blemish pose the questions
Where have you been? What have you been doing?

My sister's leg, scaled by a manic cat
nearly three years ago, still is scored and punctured.

Last September I picked blackberries
barearmed; here are the scratches ten weeks later.

We are passing through the world.
This is some of what it does to us.

—Rachel Hadas

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Theater

Beckett & the Broadway playwright

by Mark Steyn

"Our lives," says Eugene O'Neill's Anna Leeds, "are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father." For New York theatergoers, this summer has been a strange dark interlude in the electrical display of Broadway: in the supposed dog days, before yet another round of hyped projects, lamebrain revivals, and dinner-theater compilation shows lumbers into what passes for life, New York has enjoyed some rare outbursts of real drama that put the official "season" to shame. Perhaps it was inevitable: the legitimate stage has dwindled away in most corners of the Republic to "summer theater," so why should the big town be the only part of the country without its Fourth-of-July-to-Labor-Day lollipops? The "season" is now so discredited and enfeebled and arouses such little anticipation that there's both logic and cachet to disdaining it and scheduling your production during the summer snooze. The weird inverting effect of the interlude was encapsulated by events at the Circle in the Square: even as the theater declared bankruptcy, dumped artistic director Josephine Abbady, and canceled the entire 1996–97 season, its summer filler was playing to packed houses and extending its run. The reason for its off-season hit is a simple one: the star of *Hughie*, by Eugene O'Neill, is Al Pacino. But there's more to it than bankability; the Circle has always picked good plays, but in recent seasons routinely diminished them by complacent stagings whose pace was dictated chiefly by the cumbersome scenery; Pacino's production, though under an hour in length, is a full, absorbing, immensely satisfying evening.

It's possible to argue the merits of O'Neill, while agreeing on one thing: he is *the* Broadway playwright—literally, indeed, having been born in Times Square. If "Broadway theater" was an artistic term as opposed to a real-estate one, he would be almost ever-present on its marquees—in the same way that one expects to find *An Ideal Husband* playing in the West End, or, if not *An Ideal Husband*, some other Wilde, or Shaw, or Coward: these are West End playwrights. Nothing symbolizes the decay of the Great White Way more than the banishment of its greatest son, even (a few brief weeks excepted) during his centennial in 1988. His present relationship to Broadway was summed up by David Letterman, who, interviewing Brooke Shields, noted that *Grease* was playing at the Eugene O'Neill and asked her, "He didn't write that, did he?"

No, but judging from a youthful comedy like *The Movie Man* (1914), he probably could have. O'Neill didn't write *Grease*, but he did write greasepaint: most of his plays are a yawn to plod through on the page, but, in the best sense of the word "theatrical," rise to life in three dimensions. Recent productions, not least at the Circle in the Square, have forgotten that at their peril: fine O'Neill interpreters like Jason Robards

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and Colleen Dewhurst allowed their reverence to get the better of them, ignoring his innate sense of the theater and treating his work only as sacred texts—words on a page.

O'Neill's attitude to acting was complicated, famously, by his relationship with his thespian father. Eighty-odd years ago, Eugene wandered drunk into his local newspaper and was told by the managing editor: "If you weren't James O'Neill's son, you'd be down in the gutter with all the rest of the bums." The young playwright-to-be wasn't too soused to deliver his riposte: "The day will come when James O'Neill will be remembered only as the father of Eugene O'Neill." He was right, of course—not because stage acting is by its nature impermanent, but because *all* acting is. Millions and millions of motion picture performances are "preserved" on film, but, with a few iconic exceptions, the medium avails its players naught: who cares now for, say, Norma Shearer, though she was an accomplished actress and an undoubted star? O'Neill, though, also understood the power, the necessity of acting. He was a lousy player himself, reluctantly press-ganged into a couple of walk-on parts in his father's great vehicle, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. But it gave him the opportunity to study what a good actor can bring to the tawdriest material: James O'Neill played the Count for some three decades, by popular demand and/or indifference to artistic prostitution. He was a florid, grandiloquent old-school romanticist, and the Count amplified his mannerisms into caricature.

Pacino would not welcome the comparison, but in recent films he has been similarly afflicted. His performance in *Heat* was a rotation of three or four grotesque mannerisms: the randomly intense stares, the finger snaps, and the sudden ferocious roaring of inconsequential lines. In Hollywood there is a mandatory minimum "Motherfucker!" quotient, but, even so, in *Heat* Pacino went for the world record, to the point where, for the first time, the word ran up against the limits of its remarkable adjectival versatility: "You're wastin' my motherfuckin' time!" he bellowed, leaving you wondering only in what sense time can be motherfuckin'. These days, I find Pacino in anything to do with cops and robbers almost unwatchable: like James O'Neill, he has become a camp doppleganger of his original self. Only in roles like the short-order cook in the film of Terrance McNally's *Frankie and Johnny* do you get a glimpse of the old power.

Hughie finds him inhabiting much the same turf as *Frankie*. This one-act one-man-and-a-good-listener playlet brims with O'Neill autobiography. The author was born at 43rd and Broadway at the Barrett House, later the Cadillac Hotel, and much of his early life was spent on the road in one crummy joint after another. *Hughie* takes place in 1928 in the lobby of a once respectable New York fleapit, whose desk clerk Charlie has been conscripted as an involuntary confidante for Erie Smith, a small-time horse-gambler devoted to his art: "I'd rather sleep in the same stall with old Man o' War," declares Pacino as Erie, "than make the whole damn Follies." But his luck has gone south. Erie hasn't had a winner since the old night clerk Hughie was taken to hospital. And now Hughie is dead, and Erie is coming off a five-day bender prompted by his funeral. We are in familiar territory: it's a quarter to three, there's no one in the place except you and me.

Hughie was written in 1940 and not seen till 1964, with Jason Robards as Erie. It's the only completed work in a planned cycle of two-handers called "By Way of Obit": in each play, one character would eulogize a second, recently deceased, to a third, who'd be principally a listener. In defiance of the standard line on his work, O'Neill said of *Hughie* that it was written "more to be read than staged." So, when Erie appears, you tremble: Pacino is in a broad tan-striped suit, with tie askew, vest misbuttoned, a Panama hat with a curling brim . . . It looks worryingly like the exaggerated novelty get-

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up of a stage-drunk turn. You fret over what he'll need to do to make what's essentially a monologue theatrical and what flimflam will be required to fill the Circle in the Square's tricky space.

But Pacino pulls off a rare feat: unlike every other production I've seen here in recent years, he shrinks the room. Part of this is due to the physical production: instead of the Circle's usual pointlessly busy sets, David Gallo gives us the hotel desk, some ugly chairs and a large clock that ticks unhurriedly. Everything else rests on Pacino, in whose hands the entire play moves in a sort of constantly shifting close-up. If other directors had managed as much, the place wouldn't be in such a mess. True, Pacino has one advantage—he's a big-time movie star, so he knows already that the audience is drawn in, leaning forward. The reason they're there is to see him up close. How odd, though, that it's taken the teasing element of live stage performance to restore what first made him great on film. For the first time in ages, the manic tics are absent.

Pacino's approach also proves O'Neill wrong. For as his spare, economical style strips the play down, a dramatic arc slowly looms. Almost all eulogies are about their speakers rather than their subjects, and, as Erie talks, it becomes clear that, as much as the present desk clerk, the late Hughie was little more than a passive stooge. As Erie tells it, Hughie was his biggest fan, enthralled by the floozies he'd bring back and pass off as Follies girls, impressed by Erie's gambling tales and mob connections, no matter that, to the crime kingpins, Erie was little more than an errand boy. Gradually, what's at stake in the evening emerges: the worthless adulation from this worthless man was somehow critical to Erie's own sense of self, and he has to seduce the new clerk, the bored, dull-eyed Charlie, into taking Hughie's place. Pacino's performance has a kind of tired panic to it; his body moves as if fear has exhausted it. There are some unobtrusively efficient touches: he picks up the key to room 492, but he never goes to bed, unable, like so many barflies and bores, to bring the evening to a close.

For Paul Benedict, as Charlie the clerk, most of the work lies in keeping his big craggy face impassive, like a man who's succeeded in detaching his imagination. He is empty and indifferent, and would be surprised that you'd expect him to be otherwise. As director, Pacino has made one significant amendment to the original: in the text, the stage directions relate Charlie's own private thoughts. In this production, he speaks them, as asides. This makes him more of a character, and is therefore to be welcomed, though Pacino was perhaps ill-advised to have Charlie's lines put through the reverb chamber on the sound system: they echo around the theater like cardboard aliens in a Fifties sci-fi serial. Excepting that innovation, Pacino's star power serves O'Neill briskly and triumphantly.

At the other end of the spectrum from Pacino's *Hughie* is the Gate Theatre's Beckett Festival, imported from Dublin to Lincoln Center. The Festival (not quite the right term) brings together all nineteen Beckett stage works, from *Godot* to *Breath*, and you don't have to catch more than a handful to appreciate the author's achievement: if Pacino is the reason *Hughie* happened, Samuel Beckett is the only star in sight at Lincoln Center. Hardly a year goes by without some Beckett somewhere in New York; his biggest hit is a rare thing, a contemporary play which, unsupported by big movie or TV versions, has passed into the wider world, to the extent that it even turns up in Alan Jay Lerner's love song "Come Back to Me":

> If a date waits below
> Let him wait for Godot . . .

By the end of the century, he will be, astonishingly, the second most analyzed playwright of all time after Shakespeare.

I'm reluctant to tip the scales further, but I have to confess a sneaking admiration for the old boy if only for his ability to paralyze

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directors and actors. In Beckett's world, preferred directors, such as (in America) the late Alan Schneider, are little more than branch managers—there to ensure that the Sausage McMuffin with Egg is being constructed according to strict head-office regulations. If Schneider ever had a directorial vision, he kept it to himself. Most stagers prefer to see themselves as absolute monarchs, and they're right in one respect: a director's theater, like a monarchy, only requires one duffer on the throne to render the entire concept indefensible and ludicrous. Beckett preferred to take that as a given: in one of the oddest backstage fables, *Catastrophe* (1982), Beckett creates a theatrical director who is also a highly *theatrical* director and who wields tyrannical authority over P, the protagonist, who cannot act, and, therefore, has to be acted upon by actors, ground down to the despotism of theater. It's typical of the perversity of this writer that his most explicit political work should be cast as a show-biz yarn.

Or to look at it another way: in London, Deborah Warner has staged the best *Electra*, the best *Don Giovanni*, and the best *Hedda Gabler* I've ever seen. But all three productions have been propelled by her unspoken, perhaps even unconscious belief that the only good author is a dead one. Two years ago, she and her on-stage alter ego, Fiona Shaw, staged Beckett's *Footfalls* and departed ever so slightly from the playwright's stage directions: the estate acted immediately, and cancelled the production.

As for the actors, Beckett was chiefly concerned to limit their scope for self-expression. At its most mundane, this meant specifying exactly how many steps a character could take as he paces. At its most ambitious, it's his 1963 play, called *Play*, in which the actors—like Bob Hope in *The Road to Morocco*—are stuck in huge jars up to their necks for the entire performance. A similar device might have come in useful for New York productions of *Godot*. Beckett disliked the 1956 Broadway premiere starring Bert Lahr and billed unfeasibly as "the laugh sensation of two continents". He never saw Lahr's performance but moaned anyway that this great American clown had "made *Godot* about him." He was a consultant to the 1988 Mike Nichols production with Steve Martin and Robin Williams, but even he couldn't prevent Williams scattering his usual glib interpolations throughout the text ("I want to thank the Academy" etc.).

As a self-protection strategy, Beckett's efforts worked. Shakespeare, for example, wrote plays that are as specific as possible in their settings and language—and now sits helplessly as his words are shoehorned into whichever contemporary parallel the director has taken a fancy to. A recent production at the Mount, Edith Wharton's summer home in Lennox, Mass., moved *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to the Wild West, a relocation which in its irrelevance and triviality is typical of this school. By contrast, Beckett, whose plays are as nonspecific as possible, defies such an approach. Freed from any kind of historical baggage or representational settings, directors are baffled—too terrified to impose their concept of nuclear winter or urban decay. Lacking anything to kick against, they subside into compliance. Faced with the stage directions of *Godot*—"A country road. A tree. Evening."—what would you do? Make it a suburban cul-de-sac? A lamppost? Dawn? Brecht, who regarded *Godot* as emblematic of Western decadence, nevertheless planned a production in which Estragon would be a worker, Vladimir an intellectual, Pozzo a landowner. But even to allocate the roles is to realize what a banal *reductio* such exercises are. When Beckett writes, in *Endgame*, "Bare interior. Grey light. Left and right back, high up, two windows, curtain drawn," he is not describing the set but the situation. To disregard that is to misunderstand what the furniture, the windows, the drapes are there for. Beckett is just about the last playwright in the Western world to assert the old rule: the author makes the drama; the director stages it.

The effect of all this has been to promote the celebrity of Beckett himself. An Irish-

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man who writes in French because "it's easier to write without style" and directs in German would be, you'd think, a pretty hard sell in New York, but apparently not. Much of this has to do with a theater audience's willingness to endure discomfort. If Pacino's *Hughie* is an exercise in crowd-pleasing, Beckett has found it more profitable to wind up an audience. At both *Hughie* and the Beckett Festival, the customers are built into the drama: Pacino can rely on theatergoers leaning in to get a good look at him; *Waiting for Godot* can rely for its dramatic propulsion on a twitchy, restless audience willing a play to move on. We're often told about Beckett's fondness for slapstick and vaudeville: he liked the Marx Brothers—Groucho, Harpo, Chico, Pozzo, Gogo, etc.; he made a film, called *Film* (1963), with Buster Keaton, although along with *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* it's the worst outing of Keaton's career. But, if his fondness for low comedy is real, by the time it's been hemmed in by his stage directions it's somehow pinched and joyless.

This is especially true of the cross-talk in *Godot*, which, in the hands of solid actors and Beckett specialists like Barry McGovern, seems wooden. After the first two or three plays, the Gate approach seems like an avant-garde parody of the old D'Oyly Carte doing Gilbert and Sullivan: staging innovation is confined, as in *Hughie*, to the echo chamber, judiciously cranked up for a few seconds of Susan Fitzgerald's speech in *Footfalls*. But, for the most part, the Gate strives to be both respectfully literal and studiously neutral, to allow the material to speak for itself. Left to speak for itself, though, it declines to talk. Of all the productions in the cycle, the most satisfying was the one with the nearest thing to a bravura star performance. *Krapp's Last Tape* is about a man marking his sixty-ninth birthday by listening to a recording he made thirty years earlier, in which he discusses his decision to get rid of his girlfriend and the great days that lie ahead. He is full of artistic idealism—"The fire that burns in me now!" It is a theme—the foolish embrace of art rather than life—which would have appealed to O'Neill. But O'Neill would also have recognized that without a big central performance you don't have a play. The Gate has such a man: David Kelly, who first played the role in the Dublin premiere in 1959. As a result, this production can use the tape he made then, with his young voice bursting with life yet empty of it. Like *Hughie*, it is a fine performance in a fine play, achieving that theatrical rarity: the perfect coalescence of actor and author.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the publication this month of *The Fox and I*, poems by Charles Edward Eaton (Cornwall Books, $18.95), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Art

The trouble with Renoir

by Karen Wilkin

Renoir puzzles me. I've never understood why so perceptive a critic as Julius Meier-Graefe, usually an acute judge of originality and excellence, thought Renoir was second only to Corot and believed both artists to be superior to Cézanne. I keep hoping for enlightenment, but so far, nothing—neither encounters with individual works, nor the comprehensive retrospective jointly organized ten years ago by the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, nor, most recently, the Clark Art Institute's survey of its own substantial holdings, "A Passion for Renoir"—has done the trick.[1] Renoir continues to give me trouble. He occasionally charms me, frequently lets me down, sometimes amuses me, and every once in while surprises me. And I'm not the only one who has felt this way. "My reactions to Renoir keep changing," Clement Greenberg wrote. "One day I find him almost powerful, another day almost weak; one moment brilliant, the next merely flashy; one day quite firm, another day soft."

This declaration of ambivalence, which appears in a temperate article first published in *Art and Culture* (1961), is a radical revision of an enthusiastic review originally written more than a decade earlier. The shift bears out the truth of Greenberg's opening sentence quoted above and offers graphic evidence of the instability of the celebrated critic's view of this most perplexing of Impressionist painters. At first, Greenberg seemed predisposed to like Renoir, perhaps influenced by the high opinion of the painter held by Meier-Graefe, whom he admired and learned from. But Greenberg's cumulative experience of Renoir's art during his years as a working critic seemed to make him change his mind. In a 1942 review, he wrote about the "final perfection" of "so many of Renoir's little landscapes"; three years later, Greenberg still believed him to have "painted some of the best landscapes of all time." But when he edited the essays included in *Art and Culture*, removing the evidence of what he called "all the haste and waste" involved in his "self-education" as a critic, he had come to think that "even the best of [Renoir's] landscapes . . . lack a certain finality," deploring the later landscapes as "often sketchy in a bad sense." As early as 1946, Greenberg complained that he found Renoir "flaccid at times," yet when he wrote about a large exhibition devoted to the painter in 1950 (the review that provided the core of the *Art and Culture* essay) he succumbed wholeheart-

1 "A Passion for Renoir: Sterling and Francine Clark Collect, 1916–1951" opened at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, on August 3, 1996, and remains on view through January 5, 1997. A catalogue of the exhibition, written by Steven Kern and others, has been published by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in association with Harry N. Abrams (112 pages, $35; $22.95 paper).

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edly to the seduction of the pictures he liked best:

> What a profusion of pleasure there is: a foaming, pouring, shimmering profusion like nothing else in painting; pictures that are spotted and woven with soft, porous colors, and look in themselves like bouquets of flowers (so that whenever the actual image of a bouquet appears it tends to be a superogatory presence); pictures whose space is handled like a fluid that floats all objects to the surface; pictures in which our eyes swim with the paint and dance with the brush-stroke.

All of this was relentlessly pruned from the *Art and Culture* version, surviving only as a passing reference to Renoir's tendency to treat broad planes in terms of color texture, "dissolving large surfaces into dappled, swirling iridescences." "The result often verged on prettiness," the once-rapturous Greenberg noted severely in the revised essay, adding, however, "but it is perhaps the most valid prettiness ever seen in modernist art." As he said, his reactions kept changing.

In the 1950 review, Greenberg praised Renoir as "the only one of the Impressionists to address himself to all the genres, from landscape to the portrait and nude, with equal appetite and almost equal success." Ten years later, he altered this to "the un-Impressionist variety of Renoir's subject matter may also help explain the fluctuations in one's response to the quality of his art." While it's understandable that Greenberg put up his guard—as many sophisticated viewers do, consciously or unconsciously—against the assaults of Renoir's adorable children, ripe nudes, shy shopgirls, flowery landscapes, and scenes of blissful domesticity, it's certainly not subject matter alone that provoked such "fluctuations" in a critic notoriously sure of his eye and his reactions. (That Greenberg, especially in the studio, was less authoritarian—but not less authoritative—in person than he often sounds in print is another matter, too complex to be dealt with here.) What is it about Renoir that makes his work so problematic?

For me, he is the most difficult of the Impressionists to come to terms with, not because—to my eye—he is the most challenging, but because he is one of the most inconsistent; his pictures can be appealing or disappointing, charming or sentimental, voluptuous or cloying. I frequently find Renoir's surfaces disturbing—those accumulations of hairy, ribbony strokes that homogenize paint into some kind of universal silky fur. (Yes, I admit that the effect is often miraculous when it is used for children's hair.) I have difficulty with his habit of including every color of the spectrum in his pictures, especially his landscapes, so that there is never any relief from an evenhanded clash of opposing hues. Red is always contrasted with equal amounts of green, purple with equal amounts of yellow, and blue with equal amounts of orange; the result is not intensification, but cancellation of brilliance. That Renoir is arguably the most ingratiating of modernist painters ironically makes it harder to like him, although you have to be positively puritanical to resist the allure of his sun-dappled world of abundance, luxury, and fruitfulness. Who wouldn't want to have been one of the attractive young people spending a glorious day on the Seine in *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1880–81, The Phillips Collection), and who could fail to admire the painting's rendering of satiny flesh and shifting light? And yet, as Greenberg acutely observed, Bonnard's nudes, trapped like hothouse flowers in their elusively structured, lushly colored, hermetic interiors, are far more erotic than Renoir's frankly displayed pneumatic "goddesses."

It's interesting to watch Greenberg trying—as, I think, most of us have—to like Renoir, possibly in an effort to justify Meier-Graefe's enthusiasm. In his reviews of the 1940s and 1950s, he brackets Renoir with Cézanne and Degas, credits him with pioneering divided color, along with Monet, and praises him for his awareness of

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Old Master precedents, claiming in 1944 that Renoir was the only modernist of his generation "to cast more than a relatively fleeting glance back at the Renaissance." It's a questionable point, given Degas's thorough understanding of the past and Cézanne's admiration for the Venetians, but that's exactly the kind of observation that Greenberg amended in the course of his self-education. He was thinking, of course, of Renoir's "discovery" of Raphael on a trip to Italy in the mid-1880s, and the firming of form, rationalizing of space, and solidifying of color in the paintings that followed. But this hardening of form and drawing is remarkable chiefly if you think of Impressionism as what Greenberg called "a slice of nature," rendered in broken color. Renoir later channeled his impulse toward solidity, with great success, into his sculpture. His last painted nudes, with their bulging forms, ambiguous space, and hot palette are notable not for their modeled bulk, but for the way their ample bodies are pressed to the surface, for the way massive limbs and torsos are pushed toward the confines of the rectangle of the canvas, and for the way everything threatens to dissolve into a reddish haze.

Renoir is, of course, immensely popular, even though contemporary critics often take him to task for his undisguised enjoyment of apparently available female flesh. The Clark Art Institute, usually a haven of tranquility, was astonishingly crowded with gratified Renoir-lovers during the recent show. The Phillips Collection's delectable *Boating Party*,[2] arguably Renoir's masterpiece, always draws an admiring throng, as does the Metropolitan's *Portrait of Mme. Charpentier and Her Children* (1878)—the one with the curly-haired girls in blue and white dresses, their elegant mother, and the huge black and white dog, casually disposed in a lovely, unpretentious "Japanese" interior. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts's *Dance at Bougival* (1882–83), is another crowd pleaser, like the *Boating Party*, an idealized image of modern life: a pretty young woman in a fetching red bonnet, its glowing hue echoed by the rapidly drawn trimming of her dress, turns momentarily away from her eager, importunate dancing partner as he embraces her firmly. They are pictures that aim to please and succeed admirably; they are sumptuously colored, affectionately and expertly painted, unabashedly "pretty," with the "valid prettiness" that even the exacting Greenberg could not resist, but none of them, by any stretch of the imagination, could be called rigorous.

Yet Renoir was also capable of pictures that sandbag you with their oddity. For downright peculiarity, it's hard to beat *Young Boy with a Cat* (1868–69, Musée d'Orsay), seen last year in "Origins of Impressionism" at the Met, in which a prepubescent nude embraces an ecstatic reclining tabby, while gazing flirtatiously back at the beholder over his alabaster shoulder. The contrast of pale skin and inky background, not to mention the subject and the coy pose, are almost Caravaggesque, but the sexiest part of the painting is the broadly stroked, silk table cover, which accommodates the boy like an embrace. Is this a typical Renoir image of childhood? Hardly. But neither is the early, enchanting *Portrait of Mademoiselle Romaine Lacaux* (1864, Cleveland Museum of Art), depicting surely one of the most intelligent, poised, and delightful children in the history of painting; it's one of the most exquisitely painted, unsentimental images in Renoir's oeuvre.

It's hard to believe how highly Renoir was regarded half a century ago. Reviewers of the 1940s compared the paintings of his old age, especially the florid red nudes, with the late work of Titian and Rembrandt. Even Greenberg spoke of "late masterpieces" and "a glorious final statement." Collectors av-

2 The picture is currently the focal point of a special exhibition, "Impressionists on the Seine: A Celebration of Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*," which opened at the Phillips Collection, Washington, on September 21, 1996, and will remain on view through February 9, 1997.

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idly sought Renoir's work and paid top prices for the privilege of owning it. Few, however, acquired as many pictures as the Clarks, except for the irascible Dr. Barnes, who seemed to have used small—usually uninspired—Renoir landscapes as a kind of wallpaper; the Barnes Collection's full-length *Sailor Boy* (1883), with its post-Italian clarity, is an exception. The Phillipses stopped at one, reasoning, perhaps, that since they had been discriminating and fortunate enough to find one of Renoir's most ambitious and achieved pictures in the *Boating Party*, a paradigm of his favorite themes and imagery, indeed of Impressionism itself, they had no need of more.

The Clarks acquired their Renoirs between 1916 and 1951, apparently out of a genuine fascination with his work, the majority of them purchased before his moment of greatest popularity. They admired most and bought mainly pictures of the late 1870s and early 1880s—Sterling Clark believed Renoir peaked in 1881, a year earlier than Greenberg thought the painter at his best. Disliking the late work, the Clarks ignored it, preferring to please themselves, rather than to assemble a representative group of pictures. The resulting collection, while hardly comprehensive, is nevertheless instructive, not only for what it reveals about the Clarks' taste, but—what is perhaps more interesting—for what it reveals about Renoir's strengths and weaknesses.

Figure paintings and portraits dominate the Clarks' selection: pretty women at home and in public; children; a handful of men; a pair of fully packed female nudes, seen fore and aft, respectively; and a small, coy standing nude like a modernist version of *September Morn*. The cumulative effect makes Renoir appear to be a very conventional painter; most of the figures are absorbed in some ordinary task—reading, needlework, music-making, sleep—in a kind of withdrawal wholly at odds with the self-consciousness of Renoir's stroke. His method of putting on paint may be modernist, but his attitude toward his imagery seems to belie the desire, implicit in his facture, to make his means expressive. Renoir appears, too, to be a painter with a less than infallible sense of structure. There are ravishing individual passages throughout, but no sense of surprising invention or of inevitability in his compositions. Neither is there the illusion of unstudied casualness, of the unedited moment snatched from a continuum of appearances that Impressionism valued so highly; everything seems posed, calculated. The relationship of figures to their settings and to the proportions of the canvas often seems, in Greenberg's word, "flaccid" and inventiveness of color or vigor of touch rarely makes up for it.

There are exceptions, such as the well-known painting of two young girls in evening dress in a theater box, *At the Concert* (1880), which is among the most straightforward and harmoniously colored of the female portraits. The real standout among the figure paintings, however, is a roughly stroked, boldly carved self-portrait of 1875, a fresh little picture whose vitality and audacity criticizes everything else in the collection and sets a standard Renoir rarely achieved elsewhere. Some of the landscapes hold their own against it, most notably, *Bridge at Chatou* (c. 1875), because of its urban geometry—houses, barges, and roofs, the clear thrust of the bridge—which stiffens the feathery stroking and tender color, and *Sunset at Sea* (1879), because of its juicy brushwork, its frankly gorgeous salmon and cerulean palette, and its forthright contrast of agitated sea and cloud-streaked sky, punctuated with a black scribble of a silhouetted sailboat.

It's easy to find affinities between such paintings and those of Renoir's colleagues among the Impressionists—vindication perhaps of Greenberg's suggestion that being part of a group or movement put beneficial pressure on the painter and elicited some of his best work. But I kept remembering a wall in "Origins of Impressionism" where Monet's paintings of the river bathing place La Grenouillère, with its rowboats, crowds, and shimmering water, hung next to Ren-

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oir's almost identical views of the same subject, apparently painted at the same time, perhaps even on the same day, in 1869. The Monets were assured, broadly handled, and immensely evocative without being specific, their palette cool, surprising, and convincing; the Renoirs, by contrast, seemed fussy, indecisive, and overly literal. I kept thinking, too, of Renoir's talented painter colleague, Frédéric Bazille, an impressionable late starter, eager to catch up with his peers, tragically a victim of the Franco-Prussian War before he could fulfill his promise. Bazille was clearly impressed by his more experienced friend and painted one of his most ambitious pictures, an orientalizing image of three women, under Renoir's influence. Was Renoir's advice beneficial to Bazille? I think he made better pictures when he listened to his friend Manet.

I am still puzzled and troubled by Renoir and, like Greenberg, I find my reactions subject to change. Perhaps a trip to Washington to see the current show at the Phillips, subtitled "A Celebration of Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*," will help me to make up my mind. Whether it does or not, though, the exhibition is bound to be a great pleasure.

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Menzel, Meier-Graefe & the problem of German art

by Hilton Kramer

Menzel personifies the typical problem of German art so perfectly, that the story of his life might almost stand for a history, not of German art but of the German artist.
—Julius Meier-Graefe

The "problem" which Julius Meier-Graefe alludes to in discussing the art of the German painter Adolph Menzel (1815–1905) may be succinctly stated as follows: owing to a sensibility that tends to be graphic rather than painterly and to an attitude toward culture that tends to favor official opinion at the expense of new ideas, German artists in the nineteenth century failed for the most part to appreciate the emerging tradition of modern painting in the work of Constable, Delacroix, Corot, Courbet, and Manet. They thus also failed to understand the vital relation that obtained between modern painting and the Old Masters. Writing about this double failure in the first decade of the twentieth century, Meier-Graefe rendered a sweeping judgment: "During this fruitful development of modern painting German art has remained at a standstill. And to stand still here means even more than elsewhere: to go backward." It is a judgment for which certain partisans of German art, both in Germany and elsewhere, have never forgiven Meier-Graefe, and it is for this reason that on the occasion of the first Adolph Menzel retrospective in the United States, Meier-Graefe is cast in the villain's role by one writer after another in the voluminous catalogue that accompanies the exhibition.[1]

It was not the case, however, that Meier-Graefe condemned Menzel's work in its entirety. On the contrary, it was Meier-Graefe who first brought to light the little oil paintings, mostly of interiors, from the 1840s and 1850s, most of which Menzel had refused to exhibit in his lifetime and which Meier-Graefe believed to be not only the artist's finest achievement but his only real achievement as a painter. According to Meier-Graefe,

> About 1845, [Menzel] saw an exhibition of Constable's works in Berlin; he noticed with amazement, that it was just as possible to paint naturally as to draw naturally. He produced a series of remarkable little pictures, which stand out from the German art of the period like rays of light. . . . Their creator painted them carelessly; he painted them for amusement, giving himself up to very different things in his more serious mood: his-

1 "Adolph Menzel 1815–1905: Between Romanticism and Impressionism" opened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, on September 15, 1996, and remains on view through January 5, 1997. The show, which was first seen at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris (April 15–July 28, 1996), will travel to the Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin (February 7–May 11, 1997). A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and Yale University Press (480 pages, $65).

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> torical pictures, for which he carried on researches, that would have given him a place of honour in a German university. . . . [He] thought it impossible to go too far [in the historical pictures] in the direction of minute imitation. This tendency was held in check by the genius of the artist throughout the forties and fifties; the year 1858 was, indeed, signalised by the production of his masterpiece, the *Théâtre Gymnase*, conceived during a fortnight's visit to Paris in 1855, a picture that suggests Goya, Daumier, and Corot, and yet bears the stamp of the perfect independence of a bold temperament. He declined steadily after painting this picture. He lived fifty years longer and worked unceasingly. If it were possible to obliterate this larger portion of his life, he would be a greater man.[2]

This, in its essentials, is the sum of the critical indictment that Meier-Graefe brought against Menzel, and except for the date of the *Théâtre Gymnase*, which is now believed to have been painted even earlier, in 1856, it Is in my view an assessment of Menzel that is fully confirmed by the retrospective that has come to the National Gallery in Washington this fall.

What is involved in this assessment is not only an aesthetic judgment but a statement about Menzel's character. Meier-Graefe firmly believed that Menzel had the gifts needed to change the course of German painting in his time but settled instead for the kind of painting that would bring him official honors. As Kenworth Moffett wrote in his monograph, *Meier-Graefe as Art Critic* (Prestel-Verlag, 1973), "Essentially Meier-Graefe felt that Menzel had sold out after 1870 to the vulgar materialism of the new Germany."

How, then, do the organizers of the current Menzel retrospective deal with this criticism? It is, to be sure, a tribute to Meier-Graefe that nearly a century after he mounted his case against Menzel, his criticism still looms so large in the minds of the artist's late twentieth-century champions. Unfortunately, the arguments that are made in defense of Menzel on this occasion amount to little more than a rehearsal of the familiar "postmodern" academic practice of substituting ingenious interpretation for aesthetic perception.

Thus for Claude Keisch, curator of the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin and one of the organizers of the current retrospective, "Meier-Graefe's praise for the 'young Menzel'" represents nothing but "an effort to legitimize the 'Impressionist' path of modern art." What appeals to Mr. Keisch in Menzel are the very "contradictions" that Meier-Graefe deplored. Mr. Keisch prefers to see them as "ambiguities" or, better still, "disjunctions," and offers us guidance in the way Menzel "junctures" these "disjunctions." We are thus invited to believe that it is precisely in these "ambiguities" and "disjunctions" that the modernity of Menzel's art is to be seen.

In an essay on "Menzel's Universality," the art historian Werner Hofmann also does battle with Meier-Graefe's criticism. "If he is to be believed," writes Mr. Hofmann, "the real and authentic Menzel is the one who got lost along the way." To oppose that view Mr. Hofmann offers us an interpretation of Menzel's "bifocality" and "diastolic" style. "I propose to re-establish Menzel as a *single* entity, albeit equipped with a penetrating bifocal eye," he writes, claiming that "this is the hallmark of [Menzel's] universality."

What Claude Keisch called Menzel's "ambiguities" and what Werner Hofmann dubs his "bifocality" and "universality" is suddenly claimed to be evidence of Menzel's "modernity" in the essay by Peter-Klaus Schuster, the director of the Alte Nationalgalerie and another of the exhibition's organizers. Mr. Schuster does at least acknowledge that Menzel became "the favorite painter of a conservative political elite, almost the emperor's official painter," yet what he describes as "the disturbing diver-

2 See "Menzel," by Julius Meier-Graefe, translated by Florence Simmonds and George W. Chrystal, from *The Development of Modern Art*, Vol. 2 (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1908).

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sity of Menzel's work" is also to be taken as evidence of the artist's "modernity." And so it goes, not only in the essays but in many of the entries on individual paintings—the need to refute Meier-Graefe's fundamental criticism and thereby redeem the honor of German painting, while at the same time remaining curiously dependent on Meier-Graefe for the terms within which Menzel can be seriously discussed.

Given the role that Meier-Graefe's criticism has been accorded on this occasion, it is a pity that in a catalogue running to nearly five hundred pages, it was not thought appropriate to devote an essay specifically to Meier-Graefe's detailed analysis of Menzel in the book he published about the artist in 1906. That, at least, might have promised the possibility of a more open discussion of the real issue that is under debate in all this talk of "ambiguity," "bifocality," and so on—the "postmodern" rehabilitation of nineteenth-century academic painting and the accompanying attempt to minimize the profound aesthetic differences between modernist painting and its contemporaneous academic counterfeit.

If not for the revival of nineteenth-century academic painting that has been in progress now for more than a generation—a revival that has succeeded in disinterring a good many of the corpses that lay buried in the graveyard of reputations to which the modern movement consigned them—there would be no Adolph Menzel retrospective at the National Gallery in Washington in 1996. In this respect, the title that has been given this retrospective—"Adolph Menzel 1815–1905: Between Romanticism and Impressionism"—is entirely misleading. For Menzel doesn't really belong to the Romantic movement, and even in those delightfully spontaneous paintings of the 1840s and 1850s he was never an Impressionist. In his best pictures he was a painterly realist, and at his worst a somewhat fatuous academic artist all too eager to accommodate the official tastes of the Bismarck era. To package Menzel for the purposes of this exhibition as a precursor of Impressionism is particularly dishonest when so many of the arguments put forth in the catalogue are themselves concerned to refute this notion.

In the exhibition itself, Meier-Graefe's strictures on Menzel are fully supported, I think. To move from pictures like *Balcony Room* (1845) and the *Théâtre Gymnase* to the gruesome accretion of detail in *The Flute Concert of Frederick the Great at Sanssouci* (1850–52) and the pomposity of the *Departure of King William I for the Army, 31 July 1870* (1871) is to understand what Meier-Graefe meant when he lamented the loss to German painting of an artist who, at his best, conjured up a comparison with "Goya, Daumier, and Corot."

"What separated the Impressionists, as they were disparagingly called," wrote Meier-Graefe, citing the Impressionists as representatives of the modernism he championed, "from their most vehement opponents was something more intellectual and moral than artistic in the strictest sense of the word. . . . [For] in an artist we value the ethics that enable him to sacrifice everything for his art and the intellect that knows how to obtain as much beauty as his talent is capable of."

About Menzel in this regard, Meier-Graefe also wrote: "Bismarck taught the German people to relinquish a fruitless struggle for an ostensible political ideal. . . . Menzel taught us the same in art. It is no accident that both are Prussian."

What we now need, even more than a Menzel retrospective, is a comprehensive collection of Julius Meier-Graefe's writings that will do justice to *his* achievement.

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The media

The postmodern presidential race

by James Bowman

It was typical of the obtuseness of the press that it made such long and loud complaints about the fact that the two parties' political conventions in August were "staged" or "scripted." Well, duh!—as my teenage daughter would say. Frank Rich was just one of many complainers about the "year of the prefab convention" and took the occasion to show that he knew how the professionals did it. Yet you would think that the point of *The New York Times*'s having its former theater critic write political commentary would be that he—presumably more skilled at reading the subtext of staged material than someone like Ted Koppel—would of all people be most likely to see that these were the two most newsworthy conventions in years.

Ultimately, it was that well-known critic, Irving Kristol, who spotted what was there for anyone to see: that the 1996 conventions revealed a tectonic shift in American politics, from the traditional conservative-liberal orientation to the male-female or what he does not shy away from calling, in the currently popular phrasing, the Mars-Venus axis. Forget about ideology. The parties are agreed on all essentials. It is now, in the era of what Mr. Kristol is not the first to call "postmodern politics," just a question of which party is able to snap up the most, and the most popular, symbols. These, in 1996, are mostly Venusian.

Though in terms of substance, for example, the Democrats have become the "me-too" party, in terms of symbolism it is the Republicans who occupy that familiar role. That is why, as I write, they are so far behind in the polls. The Democrats insist that they want to cut back big government and regulation and the welfare state just like the Republicans, only just not as much. This makes them the mirror image of the postwar Republicans, who wanted to expand all those things, only just not as much. Yet the Clinton administration's me-tooism is couched in such apocalyptic terms, which contrast its own "compassion" with Republican "cruelty," that the Republicans, placed firmly on the defensive, have been cowed into making ludicrous displays of their own "compassion."

The problem with the media is, as always, its woeful lack of what has come to be known and widely deplored as "cynicism." Messrs. Koppel and Rich and their many, many colleagues were all bored by the conventions because they hadn't the wit or the gumption to tell their dwindling audiences that the politicians of both parties were displaying an utter contempt for their intelligence by pretending that voting for them was really just another way of feeling sorry for the unfortunate and underprivileged. This is not a matter of subtle exegesis or honest differences of interpretation. No sane person with an IQ in double digits believes that the kinds of differences in proposed budgetary outlays which separate Democrat from Republican betoken the

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presence or absence of "compassion" or concern for the old, the sick, and the wretched of the earth. Yet there seems a near absolute inhibition on the part of the press against saying so.

That is why the compassion parade, already so much in evidence in 1992, has now grown to Tournament of Roses proportions. And, as in 1992, Al Gore was its drum major, showing once again that he had not the slightest compunction about using the misfortunes of his own family members for political gain. This time it was his late sister Nancy, whose sad addiction to cigarettes and subsequent demise from lung cancer was meant to prove (a) that Al Gore was a fine and compassionate fellow and (b) that everybody ought to vote Democratic. Even if it were not well known that Gore claimed to a North Carolina audience four years after his sister's death that he was proud to have raised and sold tobacco all his life, we would have to be impressed by his mendacity. So far from loving his sister "more than life itself," he did not even love her enough to spare her the indignity of using her death for political purposes.

Gore is even more brazen than his boss, Bill Clinton, when it comes to this kind of exploitation. With Clinton, there would be a nudge and a wink, an acknowledgement that he knew it was an imposture—and even, perhaps, that he knew that *we* knew. Gore insists on pretending that it is real. He is like a child with jam all over his face who solemnly, adamantly, and unceasingly denies that he has been at the jam in spite of the direst threats of punishment. It turns out that it is his own pose of innocent compassion that he loves more than life itself. One feels a kind of horrified admiration for such perfect consistency in deception. But like Clinton—like any politician caught in deception these days—he can still take refuge in his feelings. Asked by a reporter about the North Carolina story, Gore said that he had "felt a numbness" after his sister's death which had prevented him—until, oh, just the other day—from being able "to fully absorb" the lesson her death had to teach.

I take it as a hopeful sign that even some of the most stalwart media "progressives" began to feel a little queasy at all the tears and flapdoodle. Walter Goodman of *The New York Times*, Richard Cohen of *The Washington Post*, Tom Brokaw of NBC, Michael Lewis of *The New Republic*, and Peter Jennings of ABC all at least looked around the room to make sure there was a sick-bag nearby. Even Frank Rich grumbled that the convention had been given "the touchy-feely trappings of feel-your-pain, old-style Democratic compassion for the less fortunate without the substance." But more interesting was the fact that the most memorably negative reviews of the Democrats' weep-fest came from female commentators like Ellen Goodman, a self-confessed "touchy-feely kind of gal" (which is putting it conservatively), Maureen Dowd, and Mary McGrory. Ms. Goodman wrote:

> There is an emotional narrative in the air and on the air this year. The political has become thoroughly personal. The conventions were not the backdrops for ideas but for life stories that were touchier and feelier than ever. . . . Remember back in the 1970s when the women's movement coined the phrase "the personal is political"? The point was to widen the lens from the "merely" private life. . . . [But] when all politics is personal, we don't see our private concerns projected on the public screen. We see the politician's woes on the private screen. When all politics is personal, it's not about our own collective life, it's about the candidate's life. That may be dramatic, but in the end, political life begins to look like just another one-man show.

In typically waspish fashion, Ms. Dowd attacked "the Gatsby of the Ozarks," as

> the perfect leader for an era when celebrity is the most important value, when emotion and self-revelation replace reason and argument. The President as empath offers the convention as Jerry Lewis Telethon. TV anchors and ex-

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> ecutives gripe about being used. Democrats and famous victims embrace being used. It takes a village to lose a party . . . In Chicago this week, Dick Morris achieved perfect triangulation, positioning Bill Clinton at the intersection of conservative scheming and liberal sentimentality.

Ms. McGrory was so disgusted with the convention's "tear-jerking vignettes" that she came back to them in two successive Sunday columns for *The Washington Post*, writing amusingly that "Gore depends on various members of his family to 'humanize' him"—such as his son (nearly killed by a car) at the last convention and his sister at this one. "Looking at the gorgeous Gores," she concluded, "you can only ask, 'Who's next?'"

As it is generally conceded that the unprecedented teariness of the two conventions was closely related to the parties' life and death struggle for the women's vote, such comments seem especially significant. Perhaps it is a case of the "only-Nixon-could-go-to-China" syndrome. Only Ellen Goodman could tell the Democrats' stage managers that that's enough tears, thanks. It may even be possible that this strategy for rounding up the votes of the all-important "soccer moms" is misconceived, though to think so is to fly in the face of the evidence of a great many focus groups convened by a large number of highly skilled political professionals. Moreover, it is, as Irving Kristol implies, only part of a larger strategy of "feminization."

This, in another of its phases, became evident in Hillary Clinton's speech to the convention. Her appeal was not only to "compassion" but to the romance of working motherhood. Like many women these days, Mrs. Clinton herself combines the working woman's tendency to glory in her domestic martyrdom with the baby boomer's narcissism and genius for self-dramatization. As Bob Woodward records in *The Choice*, the First Lady's attempts to raise the spirits of Eleanor Roosevelt and Mahatma Ghandi were all for the sake of learning how to deal with her own great sufferings: "In adversity she needed to find the seeds of growth and transformation. It then would become possible to inherit from these mythical or historic figures, and to achieve self-healing." She was particularly struck by the retail version of Sophocles' notion of "wisdom through suffering," as supplied by her guru, Jean Houston.

> The sufferings, or "woundings," as Houston called them, were necessary for growth and could be converted into opportunity. Houston claimed that by going into a trance for five to seven hours at a time over a period of four days she had dissolved a lump the size of an orange in her own right breast—all to the total astonishment of her doctor.

In fact, it could be concluded that Mrs. Clinton's husband's lead in the polls is due largely to the serried ranks of baby boomers' unwillingness to face up to their own worst fault as it appears in their (and our) leaders: that bedrock certainty that the world begins with them.

How interesting, then, that it was precisely this belief which Mr. Dole addressed in what, so far, almost everyone sees as his mistaken challenge to the Democrats on behalf of the better America that used to be. As Jim Hoagland wrote in *The Washington Post*,

> The Dole Republicans think they can make the election a referendum on the past and on maturity. The Clinton Democrats would turn it into a vote on youth and the future. The opinion polls, the last presidential election and the country's exaltation of a youth culture all suggest that the Clintonites have the winning hand—barring unexpected disaster, debilitating scandal or Dole campaign brilliance.

But I wonder if there wasn't a kind of brilliance in challenging the aging flower-children so directly? Of course it is true, as Jon Pareles pointed out in *The New York*

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Times, that rock 'n' roll music was at least as prominently featured among Republicans as among Democrats. "Mr. Dole has been denouncing the indulgences of the generation represented by Bill Clinton, but he has latched on to baby-boomer favorites for the campaign." The Democratic convention, by contrast, "was permeated with gospel music and preaching." This is one indication that the Democrats fear being too closely identified with the Sixties—partly because of the inevitable reminders of 1968 which came with their being in Chicago—and therefore that there might be something to Dole's otherwise crazy-seeming strategy.

As E. J. Dionne wrote in *The Washington Post*: "My hunch is that we'd all be better off if we could say a final goodbye to the '60s. Living in the past is a bad idea, and the whole concept of 'The Sixties' is a mess of contradictions." Ah, yes, but the decrying of "living in the past" is itself a very Sixties attitude. Mike Elliott's new book, an exercise in anti-nostalgia called *The Day Before Yesterday: Reconsidering America's Past, Rediscovering the Present*, is only the latest evidence that what binds the baby boomers together more than almost anything else is the firm conviction that anything which existed before they were born may be quaint or contemptible but is certainly not something we could ever go back to. As encapsulated by Maureen Dowd, Bob Dole's message was: "Elect me because I come from a tougher, finer, more self-sacrificing generation. Elect me because I'm old enough to remember an America of ice cream socials and leaving your door unlocked and beating the Nazis. Elect me because our best days are behind us."

E. J. Dionne, again, writes:

> You're no doubt sick and tired of hearing Clinton talk about that bridge to the 21st century (assuming you've been listening). But that bridge is Clinton's way of redefining the election for the last two months. It is no longer to be a choice between left and right, liberal and conservative, Republican and Democrat. Now, the election is about the future vs. the past, the modern against the old fashioned. Guess which side wins that one?

I'm not so sure that the answer is obvious. For the optimistic faith in the future whose political potency Dionne is so confident of is itself almost a property now of that older generation to whose American youth Dole is appealing as the example of his better America.

In other words, it is not necessarily the case that you appeal to the kids—maybe not even to the ever-loving baby boomers—by telling them that the future is going to be rosy. They don't believe that. Among Generation Xers more people believe in flying saucers than believe that they will ever get anything out of the Social Security trust. It's true that never before in American politics has the ticket to success been an appeal to past glories, but it just may be that old Bob Dole is ahead of the curve on this one. For it is not as if Clinton is offering a persuasive vision. As Timothy Egan wrote in *The New York Times*, "Even Presidential optimism is not what it used to be. Whereas President Kennedy said, 'man holds in his hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty,' President Clinton seems to have settled on keeping children in school and away from cigarettes." Dole at least offers a Norman Rockwell America which, though in many ways a myth, undoubtedly strikes a reverberant chord with a great many Americans.

If he fails, it will not be just because he can't persuade us to believe in that vision of America anymore; it will be because no one can persuade us to believe in *any* vision of America anymore. That, at least, is what President Clinton is banking on as he eschews vision altogether and concentrates on a seemingly endless series of small benefactions to the American people, or some significant number of them, which he has suddenly found it (perhaps under the tutelage of his former adviser, Mr. Morris) within his executive powers to deliver. His own acceptance speech, inordinately long (coming

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up to the one-hour mark he had just got round to discussing the expansion of NATO), could have been summed up as follows: A vote for Bill Clinton is a vote *against* church burnings and swastikas and hate and prejudice and terrorism (oh, yes, and incivility to one's opponents); it is a vote *for* education, families, economic growth, working hard and playing by the rules, hope and America—and, by the way, a few small but choice federally supplied goodies for everyone.

I, for one, find it easier to believe in the imminent return of Bob Dole's little town on the prairie than I do in this vague but glowing vision of the future—something which is as obviously a fabrication as Al Gore's passionate love for his sister. There may be doubts about Dole's ability to cut income taxes by 15 percent ("Some Economists Take a Less Optimistic View" as the sober, moderate, and judicious media advertized story after story on this promise), but they are as nothing next to the doubts about the Clinton tax-cut—"paid for," he claimed, "line by line and dime by dime"—and designed to help him realize his fine-sounding but disastrous goal of making sure that "every single American should have the right to go to college."

At least some portion of Dole's indiscriminate largesse would be bound to be spent productively. But all money spent on "college" now is worse than wasted. It allows elementary and high schools to go on doing the lousy job they have been doing for the past thirty or forty years, secure in the knowledge that both public and private money continues to be ponied up uncomplainingly so that universities and even graduate schools can repair, very imperfectly, the damage done at primary and secondary levels. Clinton himself acknowledged as much in his plan (of which it is hard to imagine that much will come) to draft an army of the paid "volunteers" of his Americorps to do what the teachers are incapable of doing and teach third graders to read. Of course it is natural that the candidate of the NEA should be eager to subsidize the professional laziness and incompetence of his most zealous supporters, but it is another sign of their handiwork that the rest of the people are too stupid, apparently, to see what a massive con game this is.

It was not the least sign of Dole's honor and integrity that he also had the guts in his speech to attack the NEA by name. Such reckless and seemingly needless antagonizing of teachers as well as baby boomers were what made it possible to believe that Dole really meant what he said. And how amazing it was to hear him attack—as no electorally prominent politician of our time has yet attacked—the simple-minded mantra of the last election which has since become almost a truism of the consultancy industry: "It's the economy, stupid." If there is one political axiom more unquestioned than that one, it's that "you can't turn the clock back," and Dole, kamikaze fashion, attacked both of them. One can imagine James Carville or Dick Morris whispering: C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre.

Moreover, it remains a question whether the troops are still following him. "What is more important, wealth or honor?" the wounded hero asked the convention. And the mainly sleek, country-club Republicans replied glibly: "Honor!" It may have been a little hard to believe that they all really believed such a declaration, coming as it did hard on the heels of the party's cringe-making procession of pathetic victims and somnambulistic American dreamers, but at least it was possible to believe that Dole believed it. Irrespective of its politics, his was one of the most straightforwardly conservative speeches ever given at a Republican convention—if by conservative you mean (as I would) a speech which eschews the atmospherics and ringingly proclaims: "I am this; I am not that." This is what, in the age of a postmodern president who has made a career out of being all things to all men (and especially all women), it is just barely possible to believe that people want to hear.

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Books

The millennium mill

by Marc M. Arkin

Ever since St. John the Divine, people have had a tendency to think that the Almighty works in thousand-year increments. Just before the end of the first millennium, they had plenty to confirm their suspicions. In the year 993, Mount Vesuvius erupted violently. And, Burgundian monk Raoul Glaber related, "at that time, nearly all the cities of Gaul and Italy were devastated by fire"; "in Italy and Gaul were seen to die all the most eminent prelates, dukes and counts." By 997, "an enormous dragon, coming out of the North and reaching the South, throwing off sparks" appeared in the skies, and "a severe famine which lasted for five years, covered all the Roman world" so that "it was feared almost the whole human race would be eliminated." Men believed, with the fifth-century St. Eucherius of Lyons, that "as old men are borne down with ills, so we see the world pullulating with misery: famine, pestilence, war, ruin and terror . . . The last day, not only of our lives, but of the world, is upon us."

But, from his vantage point safely in the eleventh century, Glaber chattily continued, "by the coming of the third year after the year 1000, churches and buildings everywhere were again being rebuilt . . . It was as if the very world was shaking itself rid of its decrepitude and everywhere put on a white mantle of churches." So much for the end of the world.

As we approach the next millennium, the likes of Shirley MacLaine recount their past lives on television talk shows, while books detailing prophecies, encounters with angels, and "near death experiences" routinely top the bestseller lists. Works with such titles as "Sexing the Millennium," "A Psychology for the Third Millennium," and "Managing Toward the Millennium" daily appear on bookstore shelves. Meanwhile, the news media tell us that the year 2000 will witness a uniquely modern apocalypse, when the date-functions on all our computers fail and, willy-nilly, return us to the year 1900.

In his most recent book about religion, *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*,[1] Harold Bloom, Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale and Berg Professor of English at New York University, ponders these phenomena and thereby makes his early entry into the year-2000 publishing sweepstakes. Professor Bloom's interest in religion is a longstanding one: he has written about the Hebrew Bible (*The Book of J*, claiming that one strand of the Old Testament was written by a female member of the Davidic court); Jewish mysticism (*Kabbalah and Criticism*); and ancient hermetic traditions (*The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy*). In his last foray into the subject, *The American Religion*, Professor Bloom brought together

1 *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*, by Harold Bloom; Riverhead Books, 272 pages, $24.95.

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these concerns and took to himself the role of "religious critic," an enterprise he portrayed as "a mode of description, analysis, and judgment that seeks to bring us closer to the workings of the religious imagination."

Omens of Millennium seeks to fulfill the promise of that role. Professor Bloom's view, repeated frequently, is that the New Age fascination with supernatural beings, dreams, and portents of immortality is a harbinger of the end of our age. It is a sign of spiritual malaise, which the popular imagination links to the upcoming year 2000. In his study of these phenomena, however, Professor Bloom has taken an important new step. No longer content with mere criticism, he has assumed the mantle of prophet. Not to put too fine a point on it, Harold Bloom has become a Gnostic adept.

Let me explain. In the introductory chapters, Professor Bloom tells us that the book weaves together cultural commentary (including a comparative study of mystical traditions) and spiritual autobiography. Indeed, *Omens* is only nominally a work of historical and cultural analysis; in fact, it is Professor Bloom's own prolonged credo. It even ends with a sermon. Professor Bloom not only tells us about the fatuity of popular near-death accounts, he tells us about *his* near-death experience, which, he assures us, was quite dull. (Instead of being drawn into the comforting light—the formula *de rigueur* for this literary genre—he says he experienced the light, but, actually, found it rather annoying.)

This makes *Omens* a very difficult book to review. Due to Professor Bloom's privileged epistemological status with regard to these matters, a reviewer cannot greet his report of nearly encountering the grave with a straightforward "no, you didn't." And, in the present state of society, it would be extremely impolite to suggest that someone else's deepest spiritual experiences, are, shall we say, in the words of *Hamlet*'s Ophelia, evidence of a noble mind overthrown. Instead, I will simply pass on the gist of the book and let you, gentle reader, draw your own conclusions.

The facts of Professor Bloom's spiritual autobiography provide the starting point. He tells us that his spiritual quest began with his youthful experience of "deep reading" (an immediate relationship between a reader and the imagination of a great poet) and with his rejection of a personal god as a result of the Holocaust. He then immersed himself in mystical literature, only to discover a series of recurring images. Rejecting Jung's solution of a collective unconscious, Bloom concluded that these archetypal images reflect human experience of a genuine spiritual realm. As he moved further into that realm, Professor Bloom reached the conviction that if we truly knew ourselves, we would recognize that our deepest part contains the spark of an uncreated being, one who is not of this present creation but, instead, is obscured by the forces of this flawed and mutable world. But, I get ahead of myself. Suffice it to say that the end of Professor Bloom's journey was to find God—in himself.

The first two-thirds of the book contrast the modern debasement of these archetypal images with their authentic expression in older esoteric traditions. In the process, Professor Bloom offers some trenchant commentary on the commercial boom in quasi-religious phenomena. (And, yes, there is some irony here, since a cynic might suggest that there is little relationship between *Omens* and the upcoming millennium other than the commercial value of a catchy title.) Professor Bloom also takes on forces that he believes have robbed contemporary life of its spirituality, with a specially heartfelt nod to Sigmund Freud. By turning dreams into mere avatars of wish fulfillment, Bloom argues, Freud has deprived them of their previous role as windows onto the spiritual world. Freud tied dreams to the past—or, as Bloom says, the overdetermined present—and thus impoverished both present and future.

As to angels, Bloom dourly remarks that the kindly little guardian angels that have

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sprouted on so many lapels these days bear scant resemblance to the awesome agents of God that inhabit Middle Eastern tradition. After all, he points out, when the Prophet Mohammed glimpsed the Angel Gabriel, he was so awestruck that he fainted dead away; in Genesis, cherubs were set to guard the entrance to Eden against Adam and Eve's return, not exactly typecasting for today's chubby little *putti*. Instead, Bloom dwells at length on the elaborate taxonomy of angels in Jewish and medieval Christian thought and, with great relish, on the terrifying angelic entities that figure in the associated hermetic traditions.

Despite providing us with his own near-death experience, Bloom also has a mordant take on the entire near-death industry. As he notes, there is a big difference between "near-death" and "dead"; the former state, often a misdiagnosis of clinical death, is not likely to tell us very much about the latter. But, he suggests, popular accounts of such experiences might reflect encounters with the "astral body" of shamanistic religion. He then uses this insight as a springboard to consider various traditions regarding the afterlife and the resurrection. (My personal favorite—not fully explored in this context—is the view of Origen of Cesarea, who believed that in the resurrection we would all be given perfect bodies, and so would spend eternity bouncing around as spheres.) Throughout, Bloom puzzles, Why is it these days that transcendent experience seems confined to the believers in "dank quackeries"?

Well, yes, we live in debased times. Mass culture has eviscerated religion. The Age of Prophecy is closed and there is a grandeur passed from this earth. So what else is new?

For Bloom, it is the possibility of reviving the ancient esoteric traditions, particularly in America, which, he continues to argue, is, unbeknownst to itself, a nation of Gnostics. Bloom has read extensively in the Jewish mystical literature known as Kabbalah, especially the Zohar, a sixteenth-century text written by the sage Joseph Caro, as well as in the similar works of the Sufi branch of Islam, and, of course, in the Gnostic texts of the Hellenized ancient world. Nevertheless, many of the scholarly claims advanced in his discussion of these traditions are by no means uncontroversial. I will not attempt here to evaluate them for factual accuracy or consistency, since this seems to me to be beside the point in a book primarily concerned with what Professor Bloom himself believes.

Drawing on the work of other scholars, such as Norman Cohn and Moshe Idel, Bloom asserts that this esoteric tradition begins with the most archaic layers of ancient Jewish myths. About a century before the birth of Jesus, the Hellenistic Jews of Alexandrian Egypt and Syria-Palestine revived these already ancient traditions in an effort to restore a form of Judaism obscured by the temple cult. By then, this esoteric learning had absorbed a number of other elements, including Babylonian myths regarding angels and Zoroastrian visions of heaven, hell, and millennial judgment, as well as the neo-Platonism of the Hellenistic world. Out of this heady mix came Jewish Gnosticism, which led to Christian Gnosticism, and influenced Islamic Gnosticism.

This is where Professor Bloom the spiritual seeker and guide makes his formal entrance. In his final "Gnostic Sermon," he tells us that the most important of these ancient myths concerned the Primordial Adam, the Anthropos,

> a being at once Adam and God whose enormous body took up the entire cosmos, but who actually transcended the cosmos. Our world, even before it fell (or shrank into Creation of Genesis 1), *was contained inside the frame of Adam*, *Anthopos*, *Man*, who was indistinguishable from God. Hence the Gnosis, in which a single act of personal knowledge at once comprises man knowing God and God knowing man.

Our existing world is "the *kenoma*, or cosmological emptiness . . . a world of repetitive time, meaningless reproduction, fu-

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turelessness" ruled over by hostile angels called *archons*. Only the act of Gnostic self-recognition can break through this barrier of anomie.

Among the claims Bloom makes—which he admits might offend traditional religionists—are that the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas records a more historically accurate Jesus, depicting him as a Gnostic sage who imparted his wisdom to his disciples during the forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension; that the world we inhabit is not only evil and fallen, but governed by a limited deity who, in his malevolence, obscures the true nature of our divine being. Or that the Angel Metatron, traditionally identified by Jewish sources with the man Enoch who was taken up by God in Genesis, is actually God himself. And, according to Bloom, this account of Metatron masks older understandings of the aspects of God, so that Metatron might actually be the divine phallus as it appears when God is seated on his throne.

As a descriptive account of the hermetic tradition, this is as accessible an introduction as a reader is likely to find. And, if you have ever tried to slog through, say, one of the works of Emmanuel Swedenborg or Madame Blavatsky (all of which are routinely stocked in the New Age section of your bookstore), you will recognize this as no mean feat. However, it is Professor Bloom's call to return "to a perfect knowledge at once experiential and intellectual" that may actually offend or, more likely, bewilder the ordinary reader.

Having found spiritual solace himself in the ancient Gnostic lore, Professor Bloom seeks to share his gifts with others. Thus, he suggests that the reader adopt the ancient myth of Anthropos as a way of experiencing the world and of achieving the mystic self-knowledge that Professor Bloom appears to have reached. Or, rather, Professor Bloom believes that many like-minded "lucid and spiritually mature" seekers will resonate to his call, and, on hearing his truth instantly will accept his invitation to become a "mortal god." As he says, quoting that crypto-Gnostic, Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Were you ever instructed by a wise and eloquent man? . . . It is God in you that responds to God without, or affirms his own words trembling on the lips of another."

There isn't much else to say, except, if this book is truly an omen of what the millennium has in store for us, then, in the words of the rabbinic sage regarding the Messiah, "Let him come, but may I not see him!"

"Well up on the far out"

William Bartram
Travels and Other Writings.
Edited by Thomas P. Slaughter.
The Library of America,
701 pages, $37.50

Thomas P. Slaughter
The Natures of John and William Bartram. Knopf, 304 pages, $27.50

reviewed by Guy Davenport

The page of a notebook that Samuel Taylor Coleridge was writing on in 1798 records that his son Hartley, age two, fell down and skinned his knee and that in the swamps of Florida the dominant bull alligator bellows like nothing on earth to keep away fifty bachelor contenders for his wives. Hartley was comforted by being shown the moon, after which his father went back to making notes on William Bartram's *Travels Through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws* (1791), a book that, as John Livingston Lowes's classic study of Coleridge's reading, *The Road to Xanadu* (1927), demonstrated in 574 scholarly pages, was a gold mine of images and exotic information. "I am," Coleridge once said, "well up on the far out."

Wordsworth, too, got a poem ("Ruth") out of Bartram. The *Travels* had fans in Emerson, Carlyle, Thoreau, and Southey. It proved to be a book for poets. Hack re-

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viewers doubted its veracity, and scientists, for whom it was intended, were cool toward so personal and episodic an adventure.

Bartram's travels are the best kind of adventure in that they are the hardships and *ad hoc* heroism of a quiet, city-bred Philadelphia Quaker. Lewis and Clark expected bears, hostile Indians, uncrossable rivers, and hyperactive weather. Bartram was looking for new species of plants, birds, and fish. The tropical storms he encountered, the mosquitoes in opaque droves, the rattlesnakes, the Seminoles, and flotillas of alligators were jolting surprises that he dealt with as he could.

Eight years before Bartram's travels, his father John had been appointed Botanist for the North American Colonies by George III. John Bartram had been supplying British gardeners with New World plants for years, with a London dealer to handle the transactions (their correspondence survives). The eighteenth century was an age of gentleman gardeners and of horticultural experiments (the *Bounty* was loaded with breadfruit saplings). Despite his sixty-six years, John Bartram undertook a botanizing expedition to South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, with William as his assistant, from July 1765 to February 1766. It was on this trip that they discovered the rare and beautiful forest shrub *Franklinia altamaha* "on the banks of the River Altamaha in Georgia" that has always been associated with them in the history of botany. (It has been reclassified as *Gordonia franklinia*).

A biography of William ("Billy") necessarily must be one of his father as well. Thomas Slaughter in writing both their lives invokes the two meanings of *nature*, the natural world they studied, and their characters. Both were well into maturity before they found themselves. Both are examples of the kind of self-invention that early Americans were so good at. Benjamin Franklin is the most obvious example—a Dick Whittington who would have astonished Florentines in the days of the Medicis. John had a hard go of being accepted as a scientist, as did Billy before his four years of travels (so disorienting that he always called them "five years"—Robinson Crusoe has the same trouble with time). But both earned the world's recognition, and both lived to a patriarchal age in the family house and its botanical gardens (still there). This house, Kingsessing near Darby, Pennsylvania, is one of the American "places." The Swedish botanist Peter Kalm (for whom the Bartrams named mountain laurel *Kalmia*) had wonderful discussions there about fossils. Washington visited, and Jefferson bought seeds. Just last week I received from a friend in Virginia a packet of hyacinth bean seeds, from Monticello, where in all likelihood Billy Bartram sent them.

Slaughter's biography, superceding Ernest Earnest's of 1940 (also a double life of John and William), is new in its psychological handling of an eighteenth-century Quaker father and his nineteenth-century son with artistic leanings. Science at this time easily cooperated with art, as witness Audubon. The ornithologist Alexander Wilson, who became a protégé of William's, began by sending him drawings "to have names put on."

John was British; William, American. John was of the Protestant Enlightenment, a married farmer with a large family, a stern if original moralist expelled from his Friends meeting for denying the divinity of Jesus. William's affections are unknown. He was something of a Romantic deist, without love affairs or wife. In some sense they were the same person, living for 124 years. The old William with his pet crow that stole his glasses, who received European visitors, who wrote down the weather all day, had become his father John, napping at the same time under the same tree in the midst of a Pennsylvania paradise.

Slaughter is a congenial writer, comfortably personal about the research (he's a historian) and thought that went into this biography. He is, however, all too willing to fall into step with a trendy agenda and fret about John's "racism" (that is, his unkind remarks about the Indians who murdered

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his father), and Linnaeus's "sexism" in his botanical taxonomy, Billy's periods of depression (compared to William Styron's) and other ephemeral liberal dithering vaguely Freudian and poststructural.

The Library of America's *Travels and Other Writings* is a welcome and exemplary addition to their series. The *Travels* have never been out of print, but no previous reprint has included generous examples of Bartram's illustrations (six color plates and thirty-two pages of botanical and zoological drawings) or the concise digest of the *Travels* written as a scientific report, together with his ethnographic papers.

The *Travels* caught Coleridge's eye because of its prose; William took for his model various eighteenth-century descriptions in which "the sublime" was beginning to subsume the terrible and the awesome. The Romantic sensibility was being born in Bartram's Florida thunder storms and bellowing alligators, endless swamps, and the grandeur of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The historical moment of the travels—during the Revolution—gives them a strange dislocation, a kind of secret enterprise behind the scenes of great drama on stage. When Bartram was at Cowee, North Carolina, in 1774, forty farmers in Lexington, Massachusetts, stood in a line on the village green and "fired the shot heard round the world." Cowee is still there, not much changed, except that there's a hiking club and a Bartram Trail that they keep neat and well-marked.

An American Petronius?

Petronius Satyrica.
Edited and translated by R. Bracht Branham and Daniel Kinney.
University of California Press,
184 pages, $28

reviewed by Louis V. Galdieri

Like the work of Rabelais, Swift, and Joyce, Petronius's satire achieves a rare blend of literary artistry, moral intelligence, and downright raunchiness. His *Satyrica* energetically explores the moral landscape of early imperial Rome, a corrupt, sprawling empire populated by lechers, gluttons, pansies, vixens, acrobats, and creeps. Amid this decadence, Petronius holds Rome to a measure of decency—not to a priggish or prudish measure, but to a standard of decorum or moral elegance. Even at the hour of his death, urged if not ordered by the Emperor Nero in A.D. 66, Petronius retained the right to judge what counts for civilized behavior and what does not. So, Tacitus tells us, Petronius met death with that same grace, composure, and dislike of phony heroics that he displays throughout his writing: as he bled slowly to death he dined, slept, listened to recitals of light verse, rewarded and flogged his slaves according to their due, and composed a catalogue of Nero's vices, a copy of which he remitted to the very emperor who had dubbed him *elegantiae arbiter*, arbiter of elegance.

Only three of the *Satyrica*'s original sixteen books survive; the work as we have it reads at times like a fragmented, ancient *Huckleberry Finn*, and at others like a Roman *Tristram Shandy*. Those who (like the two translators of the present volume) credit Petronius with having invented the novel, or a literary form very much like the novel, are not so far from the mark. In a lively medley of prose and verse, the *Satyrica* follows its narrator Encolpius as he flees, cons, and dodges his way through *la dolce vita* of Neronian Rome. The rough and tumble narrative opens somewhere around book fourteen of the original work when, having slipped away from the pettifogging rhetorician Agamemnon, Encolpius stumbles into the backrooms of a whorehouse, where he rejoins his part-time friend Ascyltos and the lovely boy Giton. From that moment on, no matter where Encolpius and his friends turn, trouble greets them: shipwreck, impotence, discord, Priapic rites without end, lechery, superstition, and poetic bombast all take their toll on the three friends. Their misadventures

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afford a wealth of opportunities for satire, as they suffer professorial windbags, politicized poets, grasping slaves, lascivious madames, big garrulous oafs, fickle friends, and a variety of other common social afflictions.

Branham and Kinney deliver the ancient pleasures of these satiric portraits in an energized, agile prose that aims at a "racy and funny modernity," as they put it, and that strives to capture some of the flavor of the Latin original in the rhythms and idioms of contemporary American speech. This seems an especially smart way to go after Petronius's Latin. Like all really good satirists, Petronius mostly lets his characters satirize themselves: his writing is a polite exercise in complicity, in listening, observing, nodding attentively, and encouraging. Petronius does not need to moralize; all that his characters believe, all that makes them ridiculous or deplorable or simply uncouth is patently evident in their conversation, in the arguments they use, the syntax they muddle, the slang they speak.

This is nowhere more apparent than in what is justly the most famous episode of the *Satyrica*, the dinner at the home of a wealthy freedman named Trimalchio. Dinner at Trimalchio's is virtually indistinguishable from theater: while slaves perform pantomimes, sing snatches of verse, and play various scripted and costumed parts, Trimalchio's cooks serve a sickening variety of dishes illustrating half-understood literary conceits. Fortunata, the lady of the house, performs a lewd dance called the *cordax* while Trimalchio himself imitates trumpeters, plays ball, reviews his accounting books, recites worn proverbs and garbled poetry, interrupts his guests, meditates on his own death, relieves himself, brags, stinks, and indulges in wanton displays of power over groveling slaves. Dinner guests trade wise adages—"a mouse caught in a piss pot," "a fox caught in the rain"—and grow philosophical as the night waxes on: "A day's nothin'. Before you can turn around it's night." They tell obnoxious riddles and exchange secrets about how to relieve constipation by boiling pine sap in vinegar; one drunkenly remembers a past love (Melissa of Tarentum, "a luscious tomato" if there ever was one); another bemoans the sorry state of education while demonstrating his own cultural illiteracy. And they all talk incessantly, obsessively, about money. One of Encolpius's dinner companions sums up the moral code of this crowd when he unwittingly delivers a definition of happiness: "See all these cushions? Even the stuffing is dyed purple or scarlet! Now that's what I call happiness!" No guest at Plato's *Symposium* ever put it so succinctly.

Branham and Kinney never mince words in rendering these colorful Latin speeches. They use slang freely, eagerly; they prefer daring to restraint. Their aggressive approach to Petronius's prose yields some strong, original readings: characters in this translation "cop" free dinners and "schlep" piles of wood. At several turns they are able to infuse new life into Latin meanings. So an "old queen" whose Latin sobriquet is borrowed from a lewdly shaped drinking vessel gets rechristened "Appetizer" (but I am not sure this marks a real improvement over William Arrowsmith's "Nightcap"). An insatiable lass goes by the name of "Toute-la-Nuite," the French capturing the delicate indelicacies of her Greek name in Petronius's original; a corny Frenchified pun —"a fête accomplie"—nicely does the trick when the sound patterns of Petronius's syntax don't really admit imitation in English. Or consider what the translators do when Quartilla distinguishes the endowments of her two male consorts by referring to two obscure kinds of fish. Rather than render the Latin literally and consign the meaning of her quip to a footnote, they create their own version: "I don't think I'd enjoy a sardine after today's swordfish."

When the talk is cheap and salty, Branham and Kinney do not flinch; but they are equally good if not better when things get bombastic, spooky, dignified, bathetic, or

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sad. They spin lines of good poetry and doggerel to match Petronius's meters, switch effortlessly between styles, and keep pace with the changing rhythms of Petronius's medley. At least most of the time. Every once in a while, Branham and Kinney take rough measures they don't need to take: for instance, *vix me teneo* ("I can hardly restrain myself") gets too intensified: "I'm really pissed off!" At other times, they seem overeager. Consider the translation history of the *cordax*, Fortunata's lewd dance: where Heseltine's 1913 Loeb translation gave us the "can-can," and Arrowsmith's 1959 translation has Fortunata dance "the grind," Branham and Kinney make her dance "the bump and grind." Now maybe that little bump doesn't make much difference in the scheme of things; it just seems a little excessive. The same goes for the American four-letter words that our translators use to render such familiar imprecations as *heu heu* ("alas! alas!") and *mehercules* ("by Hercules!"): these are overstrong and threaten to turn the heady brew of this translation a little sour.

In Branham and Kinney's defense it might very well be said that our everyday speech has grown much coarser than anything found in Petronius's colloquial Latin. "Alas and alack!" just doesn't cut it anymore, and can-cans no longer strike us as lewd and lascivious. If we don't trade in subtleties, then why should these translators? If we have become so indifferent to diction and syntax that we can no longer recognize inelegance, then maybe crudeness is called for. But I'm not fully convinced, perhaps because the translators seem as unfamiliar with American four-letter words as most Americans are with Latin. Sure, Arrowsmith's "bugger" is far too British and far too tame to render the expression *laecasin*, but there are a whole host of American and Americanized expressions for giving somebody the big kiss-off; my Neapolitan uncle Giuseppe uses one that most Americans know. Writing brash, candid American prose requires a strong dose of American brashness and candor. Our translators claim to keep "in touch with the current vernacular" by consulting with their university students; but doesn't that amount to admitting that they themselves are out of touch with speakers of the vernacular? Despite its bravado, this translation may ultimately lack street smarts; so when some fortunate fellow at Trimalchio's is said to have it "laid in the shade," I am not at all sure that the translators didn't mean "made in the shade." That's what we used to say in New Jersey. Have either of these guys been to New Jersey? (Princeton doesn't count.)

So what if they haven't been to New Jersey? What if a couple of Latin professors set out to translate Petronius into the American vernacular that they think they hear their students speaking, and end up committing blunders? That makes them charming, doesn't it? It would, were it not that these little failings seem of a piece with other annoyances here. While most of the footnotes are helpful, some discover Branham and Kinney striking all too familiar postures. A note that should simply refer to Quintilian talks about how, in Petronius, the wrestler Milo's training is "mockingly sexualized and transferred to a girl from a strongman"; this gender-bending jargon seems an effete response to Petronius's patent weirdness. When another note informs us that "pre-Enlightenment scholars" were familiar with the evil-eye ritual an old woman performs to treat Encolpius's impotence, we are, I gather, supposed to infer dreadful consequences about the triumph of reason. These notes and others like them carry into the body of the text the theoretical posturing of the introduction, where "the lay reader" will learn something about Petronius, not nearly enough about early imperial rhetoric, but plenty about "the great Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin." A darling of reconstructed Marxists, Bakhtin turns out also to be the idol of Branham and Kinney's textual apparatus—an elaborate mechanism of classical learning, rigged to reclaim Petronius for (you guessed it) other reconstructed Marxists. Alas and alack.

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Satirist as Sisyphus

Tim Page, editor
The Diaries of Dawn Powell, 1931–1965.
Steerforth Press, 513 pages, $32

reviewed by Sanford Pinsker

Satire, as playwright George S. Kaufman once famously declared, is what closes on Saturday night. He might have said much the same thing about satiric novels. Portraiture confined to too small a social space and containing too much acerbic wit generally rings up disappointing sales, excites scant academic interest, and then slides down the memory hole a decade later. This is particularly true in America, where the tradition that makes possible British writers such as Anthony Powell, Evelyn Waugh, and Muriel Spark never quite caught on.

Dawn Powell (1887–1965) is an instructive case in point. Although she churned out short stories, plays, magazine articles, and book reviews to keep a difficult domestic situation afloat (she was doubly saddled with an alcoholic husband and a mentally retarded son), Powell thought of herself principally as a novelist and, moreover, as a novelist of a very particular sort: "In my satire . . . I merely add a dimension to a character, a dimension which gives the person substance and life but which readers often mistake for malice." Readers, in short, got her wrong—not only failing to see the uncompromising realism that went into her depictions of Manhattan café life, but also resisting Powell's efforts to capture people as they actually are. If she had been content to poke good-natured fun at the antics of the very rich or the very poor, her work might have fared better, but she could not resist the impulse to point out that "the pleasures of the middle class are a little ridiculous, too." Life had turned Powell into a tough cookie, one who saw others with an unblinkered eye.

The same thing, alas, cannot be said when her rich sense of curiosity turned itself inward. One diary entry after another tries desperately to explain why it is that success singles out others (Mary McCarthy, Katherine Anne Porter) and continues to give her the cold shoulder. If, as Gore Vidal rightly points out, Petronius's *Satyricon* was Powell's favorite book and a lively emblem for her fictive imagination, it is the image of Sisyphus, continually pushing his rock up an unyielding slope, that functions as the Rosetta stone of the diary:

> *December 31* [1940]: Depressing year but not as depressing as the thought of a new one, and the weariness of perpetually beginning at the bottom. From the appalling lack of momentum in my progress I gather I must have originally started several ladders below bottom and have not yet struck bottom rung. There is an effort, certainly, for those who must keep their ball rolling uphill, but that is nothing compared to the ever-increasing work for us whose efforts keep nothing going up, merely keep the ball from crushing us in its downward roll. Every book, every play, every story, seems to have less chance than ever, and the factor of luck seems to have nothing to do with me—merely work to no avail.

Granted, Powell is hardly the first diarist to unload a *cri de coeur*, but likening her condition to that of Sisyphus strikes me as far more self-pitying than existentially heroic. Friends, including the likes of Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley, chalked up her dubious status as an important but much neglected writer to her lack of self-promotion. As they would have it, with the right sort of connections (say, at *The New Yorker*, where she occasionally published but never became part of the in-crowd) and a bit of judicious horn-tooting, she might well have unseated Dorothy Parker as the wickedest wit in town. Others urged her to pay more attention to the market place, either by way of adding consummated sex to her novels (odd advice, indeed, for a writer who refused to spell out the word *fuck*, even in diary entries) or by aligning herself more directly with the fashionable movements of the day. To her credit (and

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enduring neglect), however, neither the crassly commercial nor the avant-garde seemed to be in her writerly cards. During the 1930s, when one's leftist credentials mattered greatly, Powell remained, of all things, a lifelong Republican; and when the literati might have done her some good, she held their feet to the fire rather than sucking up.

Three decades after her death, the beat goes on. On the face of it, Dawn Powell ought to be exactly the sort of writer that feminist critics love to rescue from an undeserved obscurity. After all, she pushed her novels up the slopes of Parnassus at a time when serious women writers were either dismissed out of hand or at best lightly regarded; and then there is the whole ugly business of an abused Ohio childhood, her marriage to a drunken ne'er-do-well, the heart-cracking story of a son in and out of mental institutions—in short, the whole predictable scenario of everything that militates against a woman writer having a brilliant career.

The difficulty is that while some parts fit, many others decidedly do not. Consider, for example, these remarks from a diary entry of 1952—well before Betty Friedan brought us the Good News of contemporary feminism:

> The way world insists woman is primarily woman—housekeeper, mama, cookie-maker. Male doctors, lawyers, writers, artists continue to wear their robes even in swimming and are not asked to do a full day as father, husband, host, handyman. . . . Women have never been more enslaved—by their own fictions about how they handle their sick-life, how politely they are about their work. A novel could be written like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Far more representative, however, are her ruminations about why women turn out to be such a bother: "Female friends are the greatest hazard in a working woman's life for they cannot be casual. Talk about men being little boys growed up—women are little girls not growed up or little girls are old ladies shrunk up." In brief, this is not the sort of writer who can be depended on to get all the words to "I Am Woman, Hear Me Roar" right.

Powell had a very different explanation, blaming her sputtering career on the fact that her first novel, *Wither* (1925), was a flop. Crawling out of that deep hole wound up being something of a mug's game (this when her career seemed as futile as that of Sisyphus). Small wonder, then, that she kept a sharp eye on luckier writers who made their debuts to rave reviews and ongoing, often unmerited attention; or that she was savage in her witty denunciations (one can only imagine what she would make of a contemporary novelist such as Jay McInerney), and nearly inconsolable in her envy.

Yet, despite all the handwringing, Powell's motto remained "Allez-oop." An entry dripping with despair is usually followed by the upbeat, especially if an idea for a novel has struck her and she looks forward to pushing it along in thirty to forty page increments. Still, what Powell observed about Virginia Woolf's diaries largely holds true for her own: "Entries stop when anything interesting happens or whenever the writer is happy." The result is a thick tome that includes much that is tedious (we learn more than we probably ever wanted to know about Powell's tangled finances, her fluctuating weight, and a history of illnesses both real and imagined), but also much that gives us a taste and feel of the demimonde she chronicled in her novels. Powell firmly believed that "a writer's business is minding other people's business." For her, this was the "oxygen" (a term she variously applied to laughter, privacy, and most important of all, to writing itself) that made life possible.

Powell was an equal-opportunity drinking companion—as comfortable with Communists as she was with fat cats—and so it is hardly surprising that many of the best vignettes take place in the Greenwich Village watering holes that figure so prom-

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inently in her fiction. The most memorable of these anecdotes usually revolve around Coburn Gilman, her drinking buddy, confidant, and intimate friend. But those hoping that Powell's diaries will come clean about the long suspected ménage à trois with her elusive husband, Joseph Gousha, and "Coby" will be disappointed, for the diary keeps its silence on this point. What Powell gives us, instead, are witty moments like the following: "Coby spent the evening at the Player's Club. I asked him if the members did much drinking and he said, well, yes, but real drunkenness is frowned on, so everybody sits there frowning at each other."

True enough, Dawn Powell could toss off bons mots with the best of them ("Would be at end of rope," she once noted, "if could afford rope. Let's say am at end of thread"), and she was particularly good at puncturing inflated egos (Frieda Lawrence, Henry Miller, Ernest Hemingway—to say nothing of the mere mortals who counted themselves as "friends"—find themselves on the receiving end of well-aimed barbs); but what finally matters, and what makes Powell's diaries valuable, are her entries about writing itself. When she insists that the "most important thing for a novelist is curiosity and how curious that so many of them lack it," one shudders to think what she would make of the self-absorbed practitioners in the school of *moi*.

The question, of course, is whether Dawn Powell's readership will move from a small cult to a mainstream phenomenon. Gore Vidal's 1987 reappraisal in the pages of *The New York Review of Books* boosted her stock enormously, not only causing eight of her novels to be reissued, but also setting the stage for this handsome edition of her diaries. The editor of the diaries, Tim Page, we are told, is now hard at work on a biography. What might Powell herself think of all this? My hunch is that she is probably laughing sardonically in whatever corner of heaven (or circle of hell) writers are consigned to . . . and also that she will be eternally grateful.

The second English epic

Alexander Pope, translator
The Iliad of Homer.
Edited by Steven Shankman.
Penguin, 1,212 pages, $22.95 paper

reviewed by Donald Lyons

Swift led a campaign for subscriptions to it and Dr. Johnson loved it, Pope's translation of *The Iliad of Homer*, calling it "a performance which no age or nation can pretend to equal" and "the greatest version of poetry which the world has ever seen." Richard Bentley famously sneered; Blake hated it. In our day, Harold Bloom has called Johnson's verdict "scandalous overpraise of a version now dead for nearly all of us" and engages in his familiar neo-Freudian voodoo about Johnson's being "too good a son to his poetic father Pope" by refusing to slay him. Today, Bloom's report of the death of Pope's *Iliad* looks as exaggerated as his supporting jargon looks absurd. For Penguin Classics has splendidly decided to commemorate their fiftieth anniversary by publishing a remarkable edition of Pope's *Iliad*.

The editor, Steven Shankman, is the author of *Pope's Iliad: Homer in the Age of Passion* (1983). He has given us a sensibly chosen text: that of 1743, the last to have been revised by Pope himself. In an appendix, Professor Shankman collates all earlier editions (for, it seems, the first time). Save for decapitalizing nouns that are not proper nouns, the editor does not modernize Pope's meticulous punctuation or use of italics for proper nouns. "This Penguin paperback," says Professor Shankman, "is a direct descendant of the pocket editions ultimately favored by Pope"—that is, by 1741, when Pope hoped his book would be bought by "the Many."

This edition presents, for the first time in paperback, all of Pope's notes, giving us "the opportunity to listen to one poetic genius commenting at length on the work of another." Wisely, the editor prints them as endnotes after each book. The pages are

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thus uncluttered with the kind of pedantic undergrowth that Pope himself ridiculed in the typography of *The Dunciad*. The notes themselves are not, however, pedantic discussions of rare grammatical forms, varying shapes of helmet, or the precise location of such and such a river; they are not, that is, philological but literary-critical. Pope is concerned with the moral qualities of Homer's characters and with the poetical strategies of Homer's language. In fact, his decision to concentrate on the epic's "poetical qualities" of "unequal'd fire and rapture" amounts to a revolutionary opting for literary criticism and against pedantry. The one partial exception here is the frequent citation in the notes (always translated by Mr. Shankman) of Homeric echoes in later epics. This 1,212-page book concludes with three eighteenth-century indices to the poem—one of Persons and Things, one of poetical tropes, one of Arts and Sciences—and a glossary of difficult or changed terms, together with definitions, often from Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*. The whole feast dumped so devourably on our tables is surely the publishing event of 1996.

We live today in a Silver Age of Homeric translation, a time when a crowd of fine verse-makers has turned its hands to clear, strong, and close versions that aim for simplicity of diction and rhythmically flexible lines. Writers such as Richmond Lattimore, Robert Fitzgerald, and Robert Fagles have done readable and moving *Iliad*s. There is a scene in book three where Aphrodite has whisked poor Paris out of the battle and into Helen's bedroom. Helen greets him sarcastically and Paris responds. Here is Fagles:

> But Paris replied at once to Helen's
> challenge:
> "No more, dear one—don't rake me with
> your taunts,
> myself and all my courage. This time, true,
> Menelaus has won the day, thanks to
> Athena.
> I'll bring him down tomorrow.
> Even we have gods who battle on our side.
> But come—
> let's go to bed, let's lose ourselves in love!
> Never has longing for you overwhelmed
> me so,
> no, not even then I tell you, that first time
> when I swept you up from the lovely hills
> of Lacedaemon,
> sailed you off and away in the racing deep-sea
> ships
> and we went and locked in love on Rocky
> Island . . .
> That was nothing to how I hunger for you
> now—
> irresistible longing lays me low!"
> He led the way to bed. His wife went with
> him.

That this diction ("I tell you . . .") falls flat rather than flies is obvious. The winged oomph of Eros is limply wanting. No reader would think himself in the immediate presence of a great English poet. In the age of Dryden and Pope, however, and perhaps only in that age, the way to become a great poet was seen as going through the task of Englishing the classical epic. One's own verse—*Absalom and Achitophel*, say, or *The Rape of the Lock* or *The Dunciad*—was as often as not the by-product or echo, half-serious or half-satiric, of the great work of Englishing the antique text. Pope spent the better part of his twenties and early thirties with Homer, and the task formed him as a poet. Here is his attempt at the Paris passage:

> The Prince replies; Ah cease, divinely fair,
> Nor add reproaches to the wounds I bear;
> This day the foe prevailed by *Pallas*' power;
> We yet may vanquish in a happier hour:
> There want not gods to favour us above;
> But let the business of our Life be Love:
> These softer moments let delights employ,
> And kind embraces snatch the hasty joy.
> Not thus I lov'd thee, when from *Sparta*'s
> shore
> My forc'd, my willing heav'nly prize I bore,
> When first entranc'd in *Cranaë*'s isle I lay,
> Mix'd with thy soul, and all dissolv'd away.

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Thus having spoke, th'enamour'd *Phrygian*
boy
Rush'd to the bed, impatient for the joy.
Him *Helen* follow'd slow with bashful
charms,
And clasp'd the blooming Hero in her arms.

This is doubtless an unfair comparison, for the advantages owned by the earlier poet, possessed of a diction at once erotic and elegant, are overwhelming. Fairer to pick a scene of war. Here is Fagles's Achilles, furious at the death of Patroclus, mercilessly having at the Trojans:

Achilles now
like inhuman fire raging on through the
mountain gorges
splinter-dry, setting ablaze big stands of
timber,
the wind swirling the huge fireball left and
right—
chaos of fire—Achilles storming on with
brandished spear
like a frenzied god of battle trampling all he
killed
and the earth ran black with blood.
Thundering on,
on like oxen broad in the brow some field
hand yokes
to crush white barley heaped on a well-laid
threshing floor
and the grain is husked out fast by the
bellowing oxen's hoofs—
so as the great Achilles rampaged on, his
sharp-hoofed stallions
trampled shields and corpses, axle under his
chariot splashed
with blood, blood on the handrails sweeping
round the car,
sprays of blood shooting up from the stallions'
hoofs
and churning, whirling rims—and the son
of Peleus
charioteering on to seize his glory, bloody filth
splattering both strong arms, Achilles'
invincible arms—

The scale is more evenly balanced here. Fagles knows how to shape strong rhythms ("big stands of timber") to express horror and mess. There is musical subtlety and variety in, for example, the different placements of "blood": "and the earth ran black with blood . . . with blood, blood on the handrails . . . sprays of blood shooting up from the stallions' hoofs." This is a Homer who has read his Pound. Here is Pope:

As when a flame the winding valley fills,
And runs on crackling shrubs between
the hills;
Then o'er the stubble up the mountain flies,
Fires the high woods, and blazes to the skies,
This way and that, the spreading torrent
roars;
So sweeps the hero thro' the wasted shores.
Around him wide, immense destruction
pours,
And earth is delug'd with the sanguine
show'rs.
As with autumnal harvests cover'd o'er,
And thick bestrown, lies *Ceres*' sacred floor,
When round and round, with never-weary'd
pain,
The trampling steers beat out th'unnumber'd
grain.
So the fierce coursers, as the chariot rolls,
Tread down whole ranks, and crush out
Heroes souls.
Dash'd from their hoofs while o'er the dead
they fly,
Black, bloody drops the smoaking chariot
dye:
The spiky wheels thro' heaps of carnage tore;
And thick the groaning axles dropp'd with
gore.
High o'er the scene of death *Achilles* stood,
All grim with dust, all horrible in blood:
Yet still insatiate, still with rage on flame;
Such is the lust of never-dying Fame!

This, clearly, is a Homer who has read his Milton ("thick bestrown"; "High o'er the scene"). Pope achieves much tough power here, as with the sonic patterns of "black, bloody drops" and the delayed internal assonance of "smoaking" and "groaning" and the near-echo of "thick" coming in the same place the next line after "spiky." The majestic

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tableau, complete with moral, of the last two couplets is impressive and is called painterly by Pope himself. That the end-stopped couplet, with its sealed decorum and drive toward satisfying sense, misses something wild and terrible in Homer is perhaps felt by all readers. But who would think Pope or anybody could finally catch Homer in a bottle? Pope's surprising triumph was (with Milton and Dryden behind him) the elaboration of a diction capable of a coherent and consistent and convincing representation of Homer. To savor Pope at his best—over a longish gallop—I suggest reading the last book of the *Iliad*, where Priam journeys at night to Achilles to beg for his son's body. It is pathetic and tragic like few things in literature, and Pope is up to it.

How many epics in English are really worth sitting down and reading through? Few, for it is not at bottom a form native to English. After Milton, there is, I suppose, *The Faerie Queene* and *The Prelude* and *Don Juan*. By the time of the Romantics, though, the epic becomes something else, something leading to Whitman and Pound. It is already, in fact, becoming schizophrenic, becoming self-consciously literary, in Pope—a poet whose subversions of epic, *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad*, and whose poem of belief, *The Essay on Man*, are much better known than, but are incompletely appreciable without, his Homer. Pope did everything for Homer but believe in him. For this reason alone the grimly seventeenth-century, believing Milton goes deeper. Not to speak of Dante.

Shorter notices

Lucie Brock-Broido
The Master Letters.
Knopf, 83 pages, $20

The Master Letters opens with "Carrowmore," a decorous, restrained lyric about a girl finding an ornament and a piece of hair—two offerings, she surmises, to a dead predecessor—in the earth:

> She buried her bone barrette
>
> In the ground's woolly shaft.
> A tear of her hair, an old gift
>
> To the burnt other who went
> First. My thick braid, my ornament—
>
> My belonging I
> Remember how cold I will be.

In terms of style, however, "Carrowmore" is not an augur of things to come in this book-long tribute to Emily Dickinson. Many of Brock-Broido's poems—her title comes from three letters Dickinson left in her drawer at her death, one addressed to "Recipient Unknown" and two to "Master"—are composed in a sinewy, ornate language that recalls Gerard Manley Hopkins more than Dickinson:

> That I had no idea I had been travelling
> In the scrying light, crutched friar roaming
>
> Snow-apple orchards every autumn,
> Clutching the fireless stricken lantern
>
> Of your feudal dark . . .

Brock-Broido's modern-day verse epistles are addressed not to one particular "Master," but to men in general; some express anguish and anger, others an amusing obsequiousness spoken in a mock-groveling tone. Occasionally there is a note of defiance: "I am . . . nobody's panther . . . nobody's violin . . . nobody's isotope . . . nobody's humming bird." And yet, Brock-Broido's sequence isn't feminist; it's too ambivalent, unpredictable, and rifled with self-doubt for that. In "Grimoire," a poem near the end, Brock-Broido announces that her "little book of incantation" (i.e., her volume of poems) will soon "be done," but "is nothing that I want." And in the "letter" to the poet's dead father, also late in the se-

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quence, the book's high point in language coincides with the poet's own "surrender"—the word is from this poem's title, "The Sleeping Hollow of His Face Will Be the Straight Pass of Surrendering"—to less "blister & audacity" on her part and to a balanced view of men:

> And from that
>
> Tourneying, that day,
> There would be nothing
>
> More to crave & nothing
> More to set the heart on,
>
> No cumulus of knowing,
> No rubricant of pulse.

(Aptly, this is the first time any form of the word *surrender* appears since the insubordinate "not surrendering" remark in a poem earlier in the book.) Also dulling any potential political edge is the quantity of quotes interpolated in the text—from John Clare, Robert E. Hayden, Archibald MacLeish, and Anna Akhmatova, to name a few. (One is tempted to say that Brock-Broido digs into the literary past much the way the barrette-finding girl of "Carrowmore" digs into the earth, and the poet's interest in parents, precursors, and ancestors isn't overcome until the last poem, a celebration of now-ness in which the word *am* turns up twelve times.) Distancing the book even further from any kind of diminishing political orthodoxy, however, is the baroque writing, which is as far from a Williamsian "natural" speech (not to mention a Williamsian focus on the present) as can be imagined. "What lives of subject matter, dies of subject matter. What lives in language, lives by language": Karl Kraus's observation comes to mind when reading Lucie Brock-Broido's new book of poems.

Difficult, steeped unashamedly in language and the literary past, *The Master Letters* is a blow to the recent resurgence of a populist, vernacular poetry.

—*Robert Richman*

Nina Berberova Aleksandr Blok: A Life. Translated by Robyn Marsack. George Braziller, 146 pages, $22.50

Certain poets don the mantle of their art only when writing; others, such as the Russian Symbolist Aleksandr Blok (1880–1921), are unceasingly the poet. For his contemporaries, Blok was a mystical figure; his poems, vatic and eschatological. Disposed against the middle way, Blok's eye scaled the empyrean or plummeted to harsh earthly realities. Likewise marked by extremes has been Blok's literary reputation: referred to by some as the greatest of twentieth-century Russian poets, Blok is seen by others as a fatuous follower of the revolution. His most famous and controversial poem, "The Twelve," an ironic, dissonant hymn to the October uprising, was taken by Soviet critics as proof of Blok's sympathy. Yet it was not Marxism but Blok's otherworldly idealism—with its characteristic polarities—that brought him first to support, then to reject out of bitter disillusionment, the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. (He would not live to see the resulting repression which engulfed his literary compatriots.)

Blok was nine when Chekhov's *Seagull* was written, yet the poet seems prefigured by the character of Treplev—a fiery young man whose deeply felt, personal symbols served as the basis for his art. Like Treplev, Blok began in the theater (performing roles from Shakespeare); unlike Treplev, Blok got to marry his Nina—the actress Lyubov Dmitrievna Mendeleeva in 1903. Lyubov was, for Blok and his colleague Andrei Bely, the Symbolist muse, an embodiment of the poet-philosopher Vladimir Solovev's "Eternal Feminine." Solovev's cult of the Divine Sophia became for Blok and Bely a touchstone to test the ore of poetry; Blok, in what he called his "submission to God and Plato," wrote with awe of the young girl, Wisdom, the fairy-tale princess, the "desired friend," the "white sovereign," and the World Soul. As the late Princeton professor Nina Berberova writes in her posthumously published, informal biography

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of the poet, for Blok and his circle "contemplation turned into feverish searching, and the symbol of the 'Woman clothed with the sun,' was combined with the down-to-earth wisdom of the Gnostics." Hardly *terra firma*; Blok's fixation with his goddess might be likened to Yeats's moon madness. Of the poems written during this period—over eight hundred of them—a portion were collected as *Verses to the Most Beautiful Lady* (1904), the poet's celebration (or deification) of an always-capitalized "She." Blok's lyricism took on the quality of prayer in poems such as "I Seek Salvation" (translations of the poems are taken from Jon Stallworthy's and Peter France's *The Twelve and Other Poems* [1970]):

> The choir of stars grows weary and falls quiet.
> Doubt disappears. The night is done.
> There You descend from the far, bright
> summit.
> Waiting for You, I have stretched out my
> spirit.
> You bring salvation!

Blok's poetry in this vein owes as much to the romantic tradition as the modern; repeatedly, Blok, through the lyric "I" or masked behind various personae, appears as the questing hero, though a hero increasingly tinged with the tragic. Shortly after his first book appeared, Blok's world view grew clouded: still present was the poems' visionary tenor, but he began to eschew the ideal of the Beautiful Lady in favor of the "Unknown Woman," a perfumed slattern in Blok's native Petersburg. Natural settings were replaced by oneiric horrors of the metropolis:

> And every evening, past the level-
> crossing, the jocular swells,
> bowlers tilted at a rakish angle,
> stroll between ditches with their girls.
>
> Over the lake the rowlocks scraping
> and women screeching can be heard,
> and in a sky inured to everything
> the moon leers down like a drunkard.

Blok's marriage had begun to falter, and he took refuge in the bars. Often thought of as a prophet of the revolution, Blok first imagined the events of 1905 as corresponding to the Beautiful Lady acting in history; he quickly came to speak of them, however, in terms of the ominous Unknown Woman. Berberova describes Blok's downward spiral:

> Blok aligned himself with everything that must perish; he observed in himself the slide toward destruction. His anguish was the world's; the next disaster would be the end of everything he loved, the end of the Petersburg era, . . . the end of society, of a set of ideas which would be destroyed by the same fatal, implacable force which was destroying his own hearth.

Blok's premonition of the coming storm was realized in 1917. He again began listening to the music of the revolution and recorded its charivari in "The Twelve," a poem written in January 1918 in which a dozen Red Guards march through a blizzard led, finally, by the figure of Christ (Trotsky thought the image should have been changed to Lenin leading the twelve). A paean to the revolution, the poem is also deeply ambiguous—praise mingles with mockery, and the whole is blanketed in a mist of irony. The poem was among the last Blok would write. Immediately following publication of "The Twelve" many of his friends deserted him. He died on August 7, 1921, within days of his fellow poet Nikolai Gumilev's arrest under the new regime; Gumilev, the first husband of Anna Akhmatova, was later shot. The poet Nadezhda Pavlovich, who saw Blok at the time of his death, commented that "over the last few days . . . he has lost his mind." Blok envisioned the twilight of the old world in "The Twelve," but even the prescient poet could not foresee the ensuing political darkness or the tragic fate of his poetic successors the Acmeists: think of the much-suffering Akhmatova, think of Mandelshtam.

—David Yezzi

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Notebook

Freshman writing & ideological texts

by Mona Scheuermann

Freshman composition, the one course that virtually every college student must take, is peculiarly vulnerable to becoming a course in the politics of the instructor or, in the case of departmentally determined texts, the politics of the textbook committee. Composition is particularly open to such manipulation because, while students need something to write about, that subject matter is not necessarily intrinsic to the course as, for example, binary numbers are to a course in computer science. The most obvious source of subject matter for an English class, literature, is out of favor these days. "Readings" are in. When my department recently revised the syllabus for the composition sequence, literature-centered texts were no longer allowed. Thus, I found myself searching among the many anthologies of readings currently available for freshman classes. (I shall return to this distinction between literature and "readings" later.) There are dozens of these anthologies; the education that they propose is far more political than aesthetic.

Lynne V. Cheney, former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, succinctly summed up the agenda in a commentary for *The Wall Street Journal*: "In freshman composition classes from coast to coast, many students are being taught not about the well-composed paragraph but about how deeply mired in racism, sexism and capitalism our nation is and about the necessity of transforming it into the vision of the left." So institutionalized is this program that it has become virtually impossible to find a text designed for freshman writing classes that does not presuppose the bias Cheney talks about.

I shall focus specifically on four of these anthologies, but as context for that discussion I list here, with parts of the publisher's descriptions, some of the books from just one catalogue, Harcourt Brace's "English/ 1995." *Essays from Contemporary Culture*, for example, is arranged so that "each chapter contains a classic work from the canon, with the remaining readings published in the late '80s and early '90s." We are assured that "gender and multi-cultural balances are maintained by including a wide representation of women and ethnic writers." The title of *Reading for Difference: Texts on Gender, Race, and Class* should be self-explanatory, but just in case, the catalogue promises that the "eighty essays by writers across gender, race, and class lines ensure students' understanding of how powerful social factors affect *everyone's* [text's italics] life." *Writing About Diversity: An Argument-Reader and Guide* "focuses on multi-cultural issues rather than presenting the narrative experiences of individuals within groups [*sic*]. Reading topics include controversies surrounding language, diversity, gender, family, workplace and media. . . . *Also includes timely information on political correctness and men's studies* [my italics]." About *Emerging Voices: Readings in the American Experience*

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we are told that "representing the voices of a diverse society, this multicultural reader focuses on themes of growing importance to a culturally diverse nation." *Writing About the World* "stresses . . . multiculturalism by including voices from various ethnic backgrounds," while *Writing Off Center* satisfies the burning need of "the instructor of composition desiring readings representing a true diversity of American life and culture. . . . *Writing Off Center* covers the mainstream of American society and the off center or marginal groups that constitute our culture." Harcourt also offers the widely adopted *The Informed Argument*, to which I will return later.

The effect of reading around in these collections is not unlike that of channel surfing daytime television, for one meets the same subject matter: dysfunctional families (of every stripe, naturally, since the emphasis is on multicultural experience), AIDS, teenage pregnancy, "dumpster living" (what it sounds like—an essay about how one can live from "harvesting" dumpsters), prostitution, date rape, prison experience, life as a factory worker, domestic violence. . . . The larger context, of course, is the horror of being female, black, Chicano, homosexual in America. No anthology misses even one of these categories. It is important that these topics are not mediated by art; that is, they are almost always discussed in first-person victim narratives which, in themselves, are of no intrinsic aesthetic or philosophical value. Why, then, should students study them?

The two parts of the answer to this question are related. First, of course, is the politicizing of the classroom to which Lynne Cheney referred; part of this politicization is the denial of, even degradation of, aesthetic considerations. For if nothing is better than anything else, there is no particular reason to teach any given piece. Readers of *The New Criterion* are familiar with these arguments as they currently shape academic discourse.

Briefly, once we disregard the concept of genius, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Yeats, and Austen are not any more worth reading than anybody else—arguably, they are less worthwhile because less relevant (do not pause to ask, dear reader, more relevant to what or to whom). Contemporary theory, in both its deconstructionist and reader-response incarnations, has dismantled the text. Feminists have done away with "the canon," essentially insisting that any writing, without regard to quality, is of interest as long as it is by a woman; for proof, just look at the thousands of entries in a recent reference book, *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*. Not only does anything written by a woman merit inclusion in texts, so do the "writings" of every other "group." And so it is not necessary to educate students in a shared body of works that form the backbone of our culture (*whose* culture, I hear the multiculturalist challenge) because there is no canon "anymore." In this contrived vacuum, any piece can take a place, its inclusion now determined by its "relevance."

And relevance is determined—note the neatness of the circle—by the political structuring of the book. Thus under the banner of multiculturalism, sometimes in the guise of understanding "the global village," a group of politically motivated readings is collected that have of themselves little or no value but that together form templates, "casebooks," as several texts name them, for teaching political awareness along with essay structure. Such textbooks by now have become virtually inescapable. After looking at dozens of these things, I finally put together a volume of my own rather than use a commercially published text.

One of the by-products of these books is that instructors are led to teach freshman composition as a very sloppy introduction to political science, sociology, psychology, and environmental science, with emphasis always, of course, on various popular victims. The "units" have no intrinsic connection to the study of writing, language, and literature—the justification for using these

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textbooks is simply that they are "designed" for composition courses. What happens in these books is eerily reminiscent of the visions of Orwell in *1984* or Huxley in *Brave New World*: the past disappears. Selections are relentlessly contemporary. Dead white European males are of course conspicuously absent. But even relatively contemporary pieces are judged worthy of inclusion essentially on the basis of race and gender. Alice Walker must be included; Bernard Malamud no longer makes the cut.

I want to look in some detail at four of these books which are typical of the genre: *The Informed Argument: A Multidisciplinary Reader and Guide*; *Ourselves Among Others: Cross-Cultural Readings for Writers*; *Writing for Change: A Community Reader*; and the innocuous sounding *Seventy-five Readings: An Anthology*. *Seventy-five Readings*, its authors assert immediately, "is designed to introduce students to a range of traditional and contemporary essays as well as *topical pieces by international, ethnic, and women writers* [my italics]." What is an "international writer," an "ethnic writer"? They continue, "we looked for . . . essays that addressed current issues." This text, now in its fifth edition, does not anywhere in its prefatory material mention the quality of its offerings—as in, we looked for good, or exceptional, pieces. The concern, rather, is that the pieces be current and, above all, balanced in terms of race and gender.

Unspoken, but in a book like this *de rigueur*, is that, in addition to a proper breakdown of authors by sex, nationality, and so on, the politically correct themes be rung. Not to worry—everyone and everything needed is here. And so we have offerings from Maya Angelou (*every* freshman text must include her), Maxine Hong Kingston (also part of the new canon that has replaced that discredited old one), Annie Dillard, Joan Didion, William Least Heat-Moon (not a familiar name? how many American Indian writers' names do come immediately to mind?), Rachel Carson (environment essays are a given), Jessica Mitford (death is also a required topic), Gloria Steinem (on pornography, of course), some pop psychology from Gail Sheehy, Kesaya E. Noda on "Growing Up Asian in America," Richard Selzer (on the failings of medical doctors), and Richard Rodriquez (on life straddling Spanish and American culture), Shelby Steele's "White Guilt," and the ritual laments on the problems of parentless homes and the welfare state. Alice Walker, without whom no such volume is complete, is represented by "Am I Blue," a short essay in which she manages to decry the horrors of slavery and the horrors of human treatment of animals all in one breath. ("Blue" is a *very* lonely horse who gets a partner but loses her when she is reclaimed by her owners after she has been successfully impregnated. . . .)

If *Seventy-five Readings* is somewhat coy about its social agenda, *Writing for Change* makes explicit its intention to propagandize and to incite "community action." The authors, both instructors at Stanford, outline their political goals at the outset:

> We all live in communities. As citizens we have an interest in addressing those social problems that undermine the well-being of our communities: homelessness, health care, family policy, educational reform, and environmental protection. . . . *Writing for Change: A Community Reader* has been designed to inform students and to help them reflect on the issues that they face as members of their communities.
>
> *Writing for Change* is appropriate for first-year and advanced courses in composition. . . . These assignments enable students to develop their skills by writing not only for classroom audiences, but also for communities beyond the classroom. Such writing assignments might include letters to the editor of the school newspaper, articles and informational brochures, grant proposals, interviews, press releases, or fact sheets for local or community groups or schools. . . . Writing about community issues in nonacademic as well as academic contexts is radical in the true sense of the word. . . . Students undertake writing to

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> effect change, writing to move, writing to carry on in day to day living—if not in the courtroom and the political arena, then in modern public forums for discussing local and global concerns of contemporary society.

Conspicuously absent is any reference to the quality of the readings or to the value of these readings as part of the college student's accumulation of knowledge. It should hardly be necessary to insist that the function of a college education is education—a purpose served, *a priori*, by reading a Hemingway story, or one by Faulkner, Joyce, or Kafka. But the philosophy behind a collection like *Writing for Change* is that students need to be indoctrinated in the political interests of their teachers; there is no point at which these students need to acquire a base of knowledge upon which to build their own perceptions and perspectives. Propaganda replaces the responsibility to educate. To speak of students—freshman students—"writing to effect change . . . if not in the courtroom . . . then in modern public forums for discussing local and global concerns of contemporary society" not only is pretentious, it is absurd.

Writing for Change, like *Seventy-five Readings*, presents a wide selection of readings organized into "units" more appropriate for a sociology text than a composition reader: "Family and Community," "The Individual and the Community," "Education and Community," "Health and Community," and so on. All the regulars are here, including Alice Walker and the handy "Am I Blue." There's Maya Angelou and Amy Tan and Louise Erdrich—black, Asian, and American Indian covered. *Writing for Change*, however, does not stop at large victim groups, but also subdivides: thus Amy Tan's problems in being Chinese are complemented with essays on "The Difficulties of Vietnamese Youth" by a student writer and Ronald Takaki on the disadvantaged situation of the Japanese in America: "in terms of personal incomes, Asian Americans have not reached equality. In 1980 the mean personal income for white men in California was $23,400. While Japanese men earned a comparable income, they did so . . . by working more hours: 2,160 hours compared to 2,120 hours." Takaki's bid for victimhood is premised (even if his figures are accurate) on a difference of forty hours a year!

There is a feminist essay by Susan Faludi about how bad things are for women in contemporary America, a rather anti-Semitic short story about how a grocer named "Green" overcharges blacks, and the required essays on the poor, the homeless, and teenaged mothers. A few more women-as-victim, Hispanic-as-victim, and black-as-victim pieces round out these offerings. In a book of over 450 pages, there are perhaps three classical essays that might be studied for their intrinsic aesthetic, rhetorical, or historical worth: Alexis de Tocqueville's "Public Associations and Civil Life," Abraham Lincoln's "Address at Gettysburg," and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Essays on the advantages of Prozac and the horrors of "the ideal of thinness" in American society, on the other hand, seem less worthy of a student's careful attention. AIDS rates an essay, as does dying of cancer.

What all of these horrors have to do with fundamental education or, specifically, writing skills is unclear. For one can develop compassion, human understanding, empathy—if these are behind the enterprise—more effectively by reading great literature than by reading ephemeral, Sunday-supplement fare. As affecting as a piece on the AIDS wing of a San Francisco hospital is, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* has more value. The point of *Writing for Change* is not to expose students to great thoughts, aesthetic joys, or even effective rhetorical strategies; it is to proselytize and politicize.

These intentions are not confined to the instructor level, but rather are institutionally celebrated. That is, faculty at many institutions, including my own, get points for "multiculturalism." (As do whole institutions—in Illinois, this direction is mandated at the state level.) *Ourselves Among Others*,

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put together by a professor at Tufts University, boasts a foreword by one of the university's provosts. It is a significant institutional endorsement of the book's stance to have the provost write a foreword to a faculty member's book. Provost Gittleman signs on wholeheartedly to the concept of freshman composition as the perfect place to teach people

> to be able to locate Kabul, the Strait of Hormuz, or the nations bordering on South Africa [and] to know the concerns and values of the people who live there as well. We need to understand the mind of the Afrikaner as well as the world of the Namibian. . . . Every reading is included for a common purpose: to help us better understand the concerns and values of our coinhabitants of the global village. By looking at others, we will also better understand ourselves. . . . We are a multicultural nation.

Provost Gittleman omits any mention of the intrinsic value of the readings under discussion here because, clearly, such value is irrelevant. These are readings for program, not for substance, and the program is multiculturalism. However appropriate or useful "world concerns" may be in a modern history or modern geography course, in a general freshman composition course like this they can only turn into propaganda—in part, at least, because without context and without expertise on the part of the instructor (whose academic training by definition lies in none of these areas), they become little more than a PC complaint list.

And indeed, the topics in *Ourselves Among Others* are the familiar ones: exploitation of colored peoples, exploitation of women, exploitation of the environment. Since this anthology emphasizes the international, there is also a set of readings devoted to the evils of colonialism. As in the other books I have discussed, *Ourselves Among Others* seems particularly happy when several pet protests can be represented by one selection: thus feminist and anti-colonial concerns meet in an essay on prostitution in Southeast Asia (some German tour agencies, we learn, set up "vacations" for their male clients that include sexual activities). Very few of these selections are worth study from the standpoint either of the goals of a composition class—to teach appreciation of and ability in language—or of the student's general knowledge. Surely there are important topics to learn about culture that could replace that selection on Asian prostitutes or even the horrible story of "Maria and Illeana [who are] both twenty-five, both mothers, both newly widowed, and both guerrilla fighters recuperating in Canada from torture in Salvadorean prisons."

I do not denigrate the horrors that prostitution or war or corruption embody—I do object to replacing the traditional core study of literature and culture with the stuff of headlines and politics. As the volume's introduction emphasizes, "selections . . . are chosen for both content and craft"; note that "content," i.e., program, comes first. The selections are relentlessly contemporary. Not only has the past been excised, serious culture even among contemporary authors is in short supply, while the usual cast of characters, Annie Dillard, Ellen Goodman, William Least Heat-Moon (remember him from *Seventy-five Readings*?), Mario Puzo (Mario Puzo!), and Richard Rodriquez and Alice Walker (both of whom, along with Ellen Goodman, have appeared in each of the volumes I discuss) is present. *The Informed Argument: A Multidisciplinary Reader and Guide* makes its bias clear: "the readings are . . . assembled into . . . casebooks." The "casebooks" deal with the topics we have seen over and over: "Gun Control: Triggering a National Controversy," "AIDS in the Workplace: How Should Business Respond?" "Sexual Harassment: Defining the Boundaries." Multiculturalism gets *two* "casebooks," one on "Immigration" and the second on "Culture and Curriculum."

These books, as I showed in my survey of the Harcourt Brace catalogue, are typical of

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the texts offered to teachers of composition courses. I have not chosen especially bizarre examples of the currently available texts, and I could describe many more such. Since these are virtually the only kinds of books publishers take a chance on (these texts were put out by Harcourt Brace, St. Martin's, and McGraw-Hill), this approach comes to be seen as the normal way to teach freshman composition. Many of the sections of composition are taught either by teaching assistants at universities or by part-time faculty at community colleges; of our 65 sections, 49 are taught by adjunct faculty. Such instructors often are limited, as they are in my own department, to texts vetted by a chair or a book committee. Thus, if books like *Writing for Change* are chosen, even an instructor who has no desire to engage in political indoctrination in his classes has little choice.

I promised earlier to come back to the distinction between "readings" and literature. Colleges require students to take composition courses so that they can improve their writing skills; students need something to write about. They also need to read and to read writing that uses language effectively and elegantly. In the course of such reading, not only are their language skills enriched, but they accrue cultural background as well. There is intrinsic value to reading *Julius Caesar*; the same can be said for "Sailing to Byzantium." Ellen Goodman, much as she is fun to read with a bagel in the morning, simply does not bring much to, or leave much with, the student who reads her. The same, I think, is true of most of what is purveyed in these texts as readings—they are always called "readings." As I noted earlier, literature is not fashionable in academic circles these days, largely because most of it was written by writers in the European tradition, and, besides, as we know from the rhetoric coming out of the best departments, texts do not have meaning anyway, except as they are "read" by a reader. If all "texts" are equal, we can get rid of a canon which limits entry to those whose work fits criteria of value, of elegance, of craft. There is no reason to ask a student to read the short story "A Rose for Emily"—any teenager's first-person account of her dysfunctional family can replace Faulkner's artistic construct. Literature disappears from the arena; history is beyond the pale.

Contrast the aims of these texts with the "Publisher's Forward" to a 1979 St. Martin's anthology of short stories.

> Our aim in publishing this anthology may be stated simply: to offer instructors and students a rich but not extravagantly large selection of works of short fiction, all of which are widely regarded as literary masterpieces and also have proved accessible and exciting in the classroom. . . . The authorship of this volume could hardly be more distinguished: twenty-five masters of the genre spanning a century and a half, from Hawthorne and Poe to James Baldwin and Flannery O'Connor. Most happen to be American, but others—Maupassant, Conrad, Chekhov, Joyce, Kafka, Lawrence, and Mishima—are here as well. . . . In making the selections we have been guided by the suggestions of hundreds of instructors who have let us know, in one way or another, what stories they and their students have found most rewarding. Perhaps it should be clearly stated, though, that this book is not a product of "market research." Choices had to be made, our own taste is on the line, and we are pleased to have our imprint on the book. Nevertheless, in a very real sense the editor of this book is the audience for whom it is published.

It seems to me that this last remark is quite true, and that, in the same sense, the real "editors" of the volumes I have been discussing in this essay also are the academic audience for whom these texts are intended; this is a sad reality indeed.

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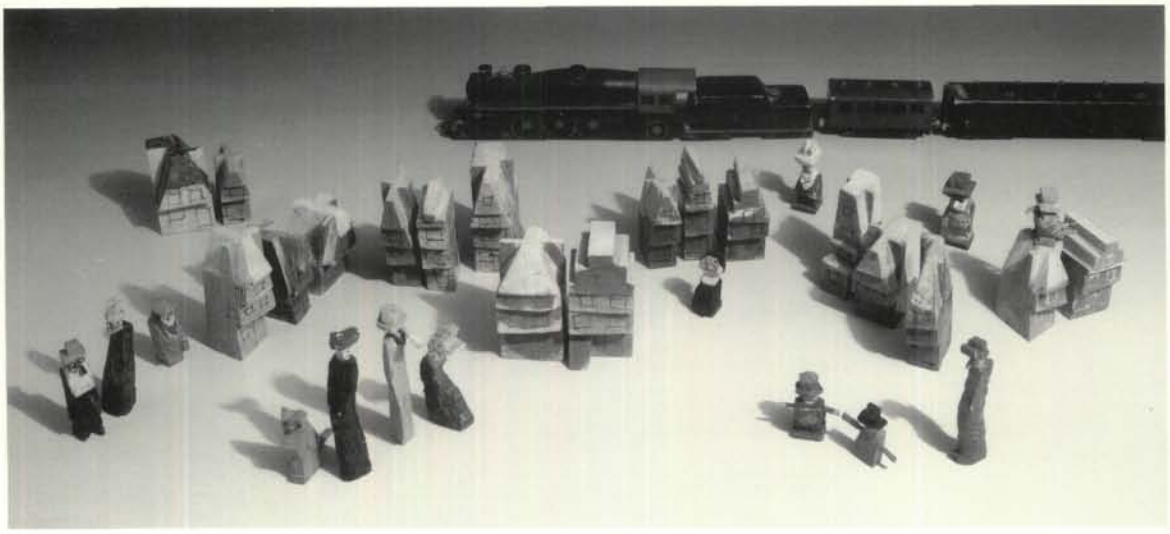

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